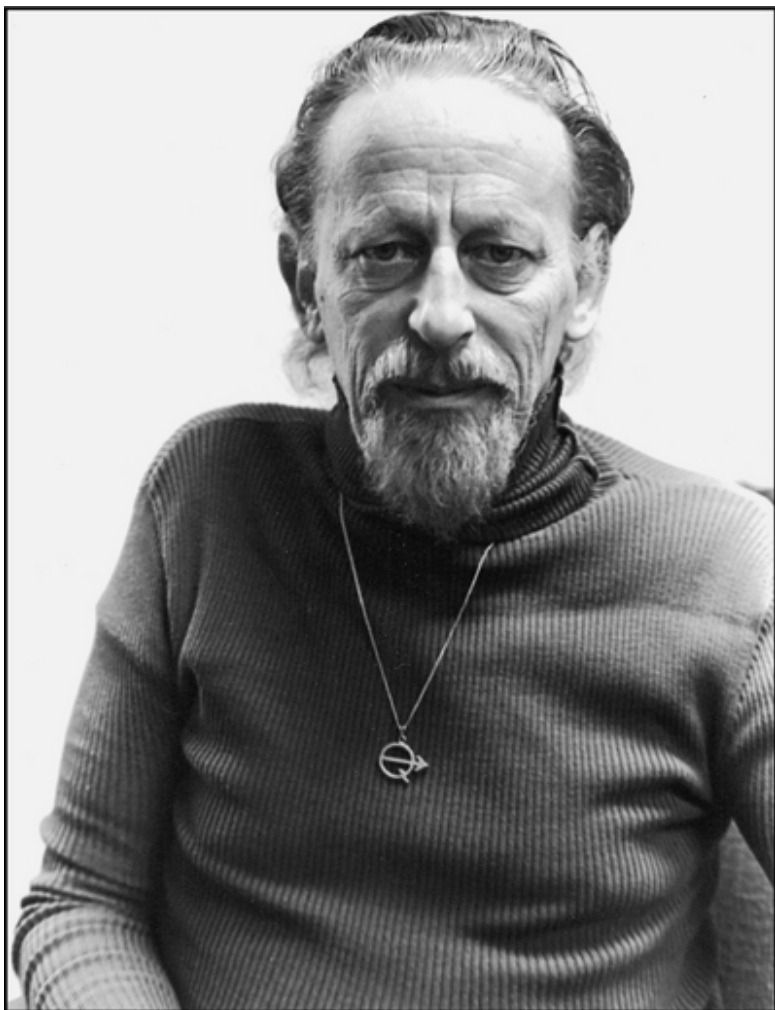


CASE AND THE DREAMER



Volume XIII: The Complete Stories of
THEODORE STURGEON

FOREWORDS BY PETER S. BEAGLE & DEBBIE NOTKIN
AFTERWORD BY PAUL WILLIAMS



Theodore Sturgeon, circa 1980 to 1983, wearing the “Q” with an arrow that symbolized his credo: “Ask the next question.”

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Volume XIII:
The Complete Stories of
Theodore Sturgeon

Edited by
Noël Sturgeon

Forewords by
Peter S. Beagle and Debbie Notkin

Afterword by
Paul Williams



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EDITOR'S NOTE

Theodore Hamilton Sturgeon was born February 26, 1918, and died May 8, 1985. This is the thirteenth and last in a series that features all of his short fiction. The stories within the volumes are, with some exceptions, arranged chronologically by order of composition (insofar as that can be determined). With one exception ("Tuesdays are Worse," 1960), this volume contains stories written between 1973 and 1983, the date of Sturgeon's last published story. Three of the stories, "The Mysterium," "Seasoning," and "Black Moccasins," are previously unpublished. This volume also contains a biographical essay written by Paul Williams, editor of *The Complete Stories*, and an index to all thirteen volumes.

As this is the last volume of *The Complete Stories of Theodore Sturgeon*, it requires special acknowledgements. First and foremost, my deepest thanks to Paul Williams. To have *all* of Sturgeon's stories published was Paul's personal vision, and his gentle persistence, hard work, and encyclopedic knowledge of Sturgeon made it possible. He started this project in 1991, and stayed with it until Alzheimer's from a brain injury made it impossible for him to continue. Though he could not contribute to this final volume, I would like to dedicate it to him. My attempt at replicating his excellent story notes is sure to fall short of his stellar example. Those who wish to give back to him for his lifetime of important work (for the science fiction community in particular) should visit www.paulwillams.com in order to help Paul and his family support his full-time care. Preparation of each of these volumes would not have been possible without the hard work and invaluable participation of Debbie Notkin (above and beyond the heartfelt foreword she contributed to this volume), and our publishers, Lindy Hough and Richard Grossinger. Thanks, Lindy and Richard, for keeping the faith. I would also like to thank those that originally supported the idea of this project and opened doors to make it happen: Robert Silverberg, David Hartwell, Samuel R. "Chip" Delany, Jonathan Lethem, and Harlan

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Noël Sturgeon

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FOREWORD

Theodore Sturgeon and *The Last Unicorn*

Peter S. Beagle

I honestly don't know whether he ever read it or not. We met for the first time after *The Last Unicorn* was published, but if he ever spoke of it to me, I don't remember at this remove. What I *do* know is that it almost didn't get written because of him.

There are certain books that I won't ever write, because they've already been done. I've never been tempted, for instance, to try my hand at a pseudo-Tolkien high-fantasy, elves-and-Armageddon epic, because *The Lord of the Rings* was a one-shot deal, unique and inimitable, as those endless factory-produced trilogies keep proving. More recently, Barry Hughart's Master Li novels put paid to my notion of writing a book based on a particular Chinese legend from the time of the three-quarters mythical Yellow Emperor; and Ariana Franklin's *Mistress of the Art of Death* and *The Serpent's Tale* completely did in my dream of setting a novel in twelfth-century England, featuring Henry II, my favorite king. Forget it. Absolutely no point to it. *Damn*.

And then there's "The Silken-Swift"....

Oh, lord, "The Silken-Swift." I read it in *Fantasy & Science Fiction*—the class of the field then, as now—in 1953, when I was fourteen years old. To this day, I can still quote sections of the story by heart, and I could quote a lot more when I was twenty-seven, taking my second shot at getting *The Last Unicorn* right. I was so intensely aware of that bloody classic of Ted's, and trying so hard not to imitate it in any way, that I wouldn't even use the word *silken* anywhere in my novel. In fact, I didn't use it at all for the next thirty years, until the very last lines of my story "Professor Gottesman and the Indian Rhinoceros." I was just as conscious of it then, but in a different way, as a sort of wave and

wink to Ted—a joke between the two of us, though he was long gone by then. I liked the notion of sharing a joke with Theodore Sturgeon.

I didn't know him, not as my dear friends Edgar and Mary Pangborn knew him, in the old days in Bearsville, New York, or as did Betty and Ian Ballantine, who lived practically next door. I can only recall meeting him three times: first, through my playwright friend, Irv Bauer, who introduced us, then when I visited him and his family in Woodland Hills, in Southern California. On the third occasion, he stayed overnight with my family and me in Corralitos, and my memory is that we actually played a few tunes together on our guitars. I may have dates and circumstances wrong, but I've been immensely vain for more than thirty years about having jammed with Ted Sturgeon.

I've admired his work for well over half a century, from his astonishing roll-call of short fiction ("Baby Is Three," "Killdozer," "Shottle Bop," "Derm Fool," "The [Widget], the [Wadget]. and Boff," "Need," "Bianca's Hands," "Yesterday Was Monday") to his two legendary *Star Trek* scripts and his novel *More Than Human*, to *Some of Your Blood*, which even today remains one of the best vampire stories ever. It may be altogether unfair of me to say this, but at the time of Sturgeon's appearance on the scene in the early 1940s, the vast majority of even the best science fiction was produced, with few exceptions, by writers with engineering backgrounds of one sort or another: far less interested in the humanity of their characters than in the rocketships they piloted and the gadgets they employed against their encounters with somewhat more sophisticated versions of Ming the Merciless. Ted dealt, over and over, with loneliness and pain, human cruelty and the sudden generosity of the human spirit, as no other writer of his milieu and time did. His was a unique heart, and it gave birth to a unique voice.

Of those three brief times, I remember best our playing together. I remember a strong, notably clear rhythm (did he have a twelve-string guitar with him then?), and a particularly impish lead line, when we switched off, to match that swift, startling grin. I was deeply affected by what he did and who he was, and I'm grateful that I did get to meet him. I wish I'd known him properly.

FOREWORD

Lifelong Passion: Theodore Sturgeon's Fiction

Debbie Notkin

At a small convention near San Francisco in the 1980s, the late Judith Merrill was reminiscing about Theodore Sturgeon. Paul Williams asked her what she thought of the story "Mr. Costello, Hero." "Not one of the great ones," Judy said with her characteristic certainty. "I know because I don't remember it."

That metric doesn't work for me. I don't remember all of them, but then they come back in sharp relief if I open a book to one, or someone talks about it.

I can't write about Theodore Sturgeon without writing about myself. The fiction of Theodore Sturgeon is a lifelong passion of mine. "Lifelong passion" may sound like a phrase from a teenage vampire novel, or perhaps a 1940s romantic movie. For me, this one has been more like a term used by a hermit living in the library stacks.

I was probably eleven when my father gave me my first adult science fiction story (by Isaac Asimov). I was probably twelve when I learned that the books on Dad's shelves that said "edited by Groff Conklin," usually had a story by Theodore Sturgeon in them, and that I could read that story from each book before I went back and read anything else. The same heuristic applied to the library. That would have been in 1962 or 1963; science fiction was still far closer to the pulp magazines than to the college classroom.

I didn't buy many books until I was out on my own. I remember buying *Sturgeon Is Alive and Well* in paperback, from the college bookstore. New stories, when I thought I had found them all!

It's a vicious rumor that the reason I was partners with Tom

Whitmore for fifteen years was that he would find me uncollected Sturgeon stories. Well, okay, it's a vicious rumor that that was the only reason. Tom knew that checking crumbling magazines and obscure anthologies for Sturgeon stories was a way to my heart. He was good enough at it that by the time Bill Contento created the first comprehensive index to science fiction stories, there really wasn't very much published Sturgeon I hadn't read. (I believed that until this series started to appear, and Paul Williams and others dug up the really obscure early and unpublished pieces.)

I met the man himself a few times; I was an easy target for his legendary charm, but we never spent more than a few minutes in each other's company. I have the obligatory signed book with the "ask the next question" glyph that he was so fond of. I have a clear memory of his piercing blue eyes, and the way he flirted with me by saying sweet things about booksellers—which was what I was doing at the time.

What interests me now about my forty-plus-year love affair with Sturgeon's fiction is: What drew me in? What led a twelve-year-old girl with an extensive bookshelf at her fingertips to focus in on Sturgeon? I can remember the frisson of pleasure looking at a contents page, but I genuinely can't recall why those were the stories I wanted to read. All I can do is make guesses.

First, the man could write. I was far too young to recognize specific stylistic tricks, but I imagine that I realized even then that his sentences, paragraphs, and stories were smoother, and more interesting, than most of the other men (and I use that word intentionally) whose stories I was reading.

Second, he liked and was interested in people. I grew up in a people-focused household, lots of guests, lots of international guests, conversation, interaction. Sturgeon was often writing about the kinds of people I hadn't met or didn't know, which was a plus. More important, I think, is that the people in his stories seemed real: complicated, imperfect, confused. I was confused; maybe I was looking for stories about other confused people, not the single-minded, confident heroes I found in most other stories of the time.

Third, he wrote about women. As a feminist adult, I certainly have reservations about how Sturgeon wrote female characters. When I give his stories to women who didn't grow up with them,

my friends often say quizzically, “You *like* the women in those stories?” But all I knew then was that there *were* women in those stories: Arthur C. Clarke had no women; Asimov’s were way off the norm in one way or another; Heinlein’s were ... well, entire books have been written about that. Sturgeon’s women were beautiful and smart, and they actually got to do things. Some of them were even scientists! That was enough for me then; a hell of a lot more than I was finding in most of what I read.

I can’t resist giving you a short list of favorites that aren’t in this volume: “Bright Segment” shook me up for weeks, and has informed everything I think about how and why humans abuse each other; “Thunder and Roses” might just be the best anti-war story ever written (though Kim Stanley Robinson’s “The Lucky Strike” is up there with it); “Bulkhead” and “The Other Man” both say important things about who we share our own skulls with; “Die, Maestro, Die!” is a chilling mainstream story set in the big-band jazz era. I think Judy Merrill was wrong about “Mr. Costello, Hero,” which Paul and I both consider to be one of the best stories ever written about the lust for power. All of these can be found in previous volumes in this series (see the index in the back of the book to learn which stories are in which volumes).

Then there’s this book. I don’t think of this as Sturgeon’s finest period—few Sturgeon aficionados do—but still ...

“Case and the Dreamer,” “Why Dolphins Don’t Bite,” “Blue Butter,” and “Not an Affair” are all the kind of stories I was combing early Groff Conklin anthologies for: single stories good enough to warrant buying the whole book, even if there’s nothing else there. And even the smallest, most trivial stories (and this volume has some) have those well-written sentences, those developed characters, those small memorable moments. Sturgeon’s *oeuvre* ranged from good to great, and if there’s one thing this series proves, it’s that even the “only good” stories are worth reading.

A lifelong passion is even better when shared: Paul Williams is one of the few people I ever met who cared about Sturgeon’s work as much as (more than) I do. Paul’s story notes for the previous volumes were a labor of love, and a labor indeed. I deeply wish he were well enough to finish the task; and I thank him for his insights, his patience, and his readiness to involve me

in this project of his heart.

I can't imagine what it must be like for Noël Sturgeon, to travel a life from being a fictionalized character in your father's stories to being the editor of your father's collected stories. Certainly, I knew her name decades before I thought I would ever meet her. She has done a masterful job on these last volumes, and in doing so, she has brought Paul's and my (and many other people's) dreams to a most satisfying conclusion. I appreciate that more than I can say.

Tuesdays are Worse

He heard Angela's voice as he let himself in. "... and for heaven's sake behave yourself tonight. Daddy'll be very tired."

"All right, Mummy," said the back yard.

Les stood in the hall, his topcoat off one shoulder, his hat half extended toward the shelf over the umbrella stand. He cursed himself for ever having mentioned this Tuesday business to his wife. He would know better in the future. It was one thing to get sympathy, another to stand for these catechizing silences, this careful consideration.

He hung up his coat, and as he did so his attention was drawn to the two new scratches on the hardwood floor. They curved around the newel, parallel, bright, and deep. Roller skates again—Oh, what was the good of it? What weapons do you use against such innate destructiveness and stupidity in children, after you've tanned their bottoms red and deprived them of everything you can think of that they might value?

Shuff-shuff across the kitchen. (You'd think she'd get rid of those old slippers, or get a pair that.... He shook his head wearily. Hang on tight. On Tuesday, the tapping of heels would annoy you as much.) "Les, darling! You're home already!"

She came close to him. He put his arms around her automatically. His eyes dropped as he held her, and again he saw the scratches. He compressed his lips to keep from mentioning them right away. Why start out the evening with a fuss? She saw the lips, and an answering tightness appeared between her eyes. "Again today?" she asked.

"It's Tuesday, isn't it?"

She took his hat. "Go on into the living room and relax. Dinner in a jiffy. Roast lamb."

He ignored the suggestion about the living room as if it were a pointless joke. "Where's Rosalind?"

"Out back."

He should have said, "Where's Bubbles?" "Rosalind" was a name reserved for school, birth certificates, and stern episodes—a

prelude to punishment. Angela said quickly, "She's been very good today."

He ignored this, too. Angela always spoke up for the child. He marched through the hall and across the kitchen to the windows, with their red-and-white cottage curtains. He had wanted Venetian blinds and straight drapes.

He peered outside. Rosalind, who was seven, was standing out there in the dusk, talking with another little girl. Les cast a quick and practiced eye up and down the flower beds. Everything seemed all right. Of course, the light was none too good....

There was the faintest of crackles behind him. He whirled. "Don't do that!"

"I'm sorry." Angela said it so swiftly that it was out almost before he had stopped speaking. She stopped pulling her knuckles, dropped her hands to her sides. He squirmed his shoulders and opened the back door.

"Les."

"Be quiet," he said. "What do you want?"

"Where are you going?"

"I thought," he said carefully, "that I would get a breath of air. Is that wrong?"

"No," she said tiredly. She knelt and opened the oven.

He watched her. "Why the questions? What did you think I was going to do—spy on a couple of kids?"

She turned to face him, a two-tined fork in one hand, a basting spoon in the other. She said, "I have no idea," and went to the door. "Bubbles!"

It came back like an echo. "Yes, Mummy!" and then, "Last touch!" as she thumped the other child and came pelting into the house. "Here I am, Mummy. Hello, Daddy." She gave him a quick smile with the lower half of her face. She smiled like Miss Maison, the gaunt receptionist at the office, who smiled like that at him every morning, and who did not like him. Women. They learned their tricks early. Did them no good if you were onto them, though.

"Wash your hands, honey. Apricot pie." Les wondered obscurely how this particle of menu affected the child. Angela's "Dinner in a jiffy—roast lamb," had struck him as inane. Rosalind went to wash, and came back—she seems clean, he thought—with a tuneless mum-mum-num-num which he bore with

wordless fortitude. Finally, "Let's eat it," Angela said with her usual phrase.

Les wondered vaguely why he should be annoyed with any idea connected with "always." It was possibly because he was beginning to doubt the "always" idea. There is no always. You may not always be master of your own house. You may not always have a job. Angela ... there seemed an "always" about Angela, somehow, this pretty, inarticulate person who could always have dinner on time and refused to argue. He let his mind drift back to their meeting, where she sang. Sang.... She never sang any more. Hadn't for weeks, at any rate. He shrugged, watching her.

Rosalind danced around her mother as dinner was served. She had Angela's small wide-spaced eyes and placid brow, Angela's carven mouth and emotional nostrils. All this was built onto a miniature of his own square frame.

Les took his place at the table, his eyes flicking over the setting. He did not like his napkin under his fork. His napkin was not under his fork. He did not like butter on his bread plate. There was no butter on his bread plate. He exhaled, waited for Angela to begin, and started to eat.

It was a delicious and interminable meal. Once Rosalind reached for salt, bumped her milk glass. It teetered. Les watched it and stopped chewing. Angela stopped breathing. Nothing spilled. Things went on. Rosalind, who usually talked too much, too loudly, and with her mouth full, talked not at all, and watched Les between bites.

And then Angela committed the real enormity of tactlessness. Possibly it was an attempt—any attempt—to fill the silence with small talk. It certainly could mean nothing—his office affairs were beyond her, or at least he considered them so, which amounted to the same thing. She said, "How's Parks?"

How's Parks. Parks, with his high forehead and large white teeth and pleasant, unshakable secretiveness. How's Parks, who came to his office every Tuesday, and watched while Les entered and sub-balanced the Stockton account—the most important account the firm had, the account for which he had been groomed and promoted. Parks was there on Mr. Bryce's orders. Parks was authorized to ask any question, to question any method. Today had been the ninth consecutive Tuesday on which

Parks had spent the afternoon with him.

Once, weeks ago, he had asked Parks why he was there. Parks was very pleasant about it. He smiled, tapped Les on the shoulder, and said, "You'll find out in time, old man. I really can't tell you. I would if I could."

Les could have gone to Mr. Bryce and asked him, but he didn't dare, because of what he might find out. He racked his brains for some reason for which he might be fired—some little oversight in eleven years of steady work for the firm—and could find none. But bosses didn't need a reason. The axe could fall at any time, on anyone. On any little man in the firm. And now, when he had come home, relieved at last of the pressure of the long hours with Parks, Angela was pushing it all back on him with her "How's Parks?"

He glared at her, a lightning glance, a bullet of a glance. He said, "He's fine." That should stop it. And later, after the child was in bed, Angela would get a very careful exposition of the uses of diplomacy.

Angela said, "Still haven't found out why he's been sent to your office?"

Les put down his fork with great care. He lifted his napkin, dabbed at his lips, put the napkin down. He looked at his hands, front and back, and put them on the table, one at a time, one on each side of his plate. He opened his mouth to speak. Angela closed her eyes.

Rosalind cut piecrust with the side of her fork, lifted the piece she had cut without changing her grip. The sight had, on Les, the effect of a relay, switching in a new circuit. Almost joyfully, he barked, "Rosalind!"

The child jumped, blinked, and her face began to pucker up. "Be good enough to hold your fork like a civilized human being. It is not a shovel."

Angela's face became carefully bland. She reached out and touched the child's shoulder. "Do hold it properly, darling," she said, her voice like her hand, gentle. Her voice was different, though no louder, when she said, "I knew you'd manage to find something...."

"No trouble at all," said Les nastily.

"All gone," said Rosalind, still using, at seven, the first phrase she had ever spoken. "MayIbescuzed?"

"Yes, honey. Hop into the bath, now, and come down for your good-nights when you're all clean and shiny."

Rosalind slipped from her chair and ran around the table—the opposite side of the table from her father's chair. It was a longer way to the door. Good heavens, thought Les, does the child think I'll reach out and clout her if she comes close? "Just a minute, young lady."

Rosalind slid to a stop, paling, and put a frightened gaze up to him. In her eyes Les could all but see a catalogue of undiscovered crimes whisking past, as if they were printed on a revolving drum. Certainly there must be one that he could.... Broken flowers? Good clothes torn? Nothing spilled tonight.... Ah. Those scratches ... the roller skates. "Rosalind, I am at my wits' end. I simply do not know what to do with you. You are without doubt the most destruc—"

Angela clapped her hands. "Hop along, Bubbles! It's late. Go on now—scoot. Quick!"

Rosalind waited for no second invitation. She escaped.

Les sat absolutely thunderstruck. "Angela!" he breathed. "I was speaking to the child."

She rose, scraping and piling plates. "You were," she said. "I saw you, Les. I saw you looking for something—anything—to punish her for. You've been looking ever since you got home. You went straight out to hunt for something the instant you got in the door. Just because you have trouble at the office."

"You're mad," he said. "You're out of your head. What's got into you? You've never come out with such a thing before!" He forced a calm, felt for something solid in the shifting conversational ground, found it. "By what fantastic intuitive process do you connect my discipline of the child with any events at the office?"

"Oh—!" she said. "I get so terribly angry." She rose abruptly and went to the sink. She tried to busy her hands and failed.

"Do tell me," he said icily, "about how angry you get."

"I get angry because I can't talk. Because every time I have a thing to say, I cry. Oh, how I envy you your words! You always had words. I fell in love with you and your words. Only a big man, a good man, could think so—so clean, and have all those words." She stopped, put up her apron and into its folds released one high, broken sob. She tore off a paper towel, blew her nose,

threw the towel away and came back to sit opposite him. Her face was blotched and her eyes so bright they looked sick. "I never can say anything," she half-whispered. "I always have to go and cry. So I don't talk. It isn't worth it."

"It is in this case," he said. "You've gone too far to stop."

"Oh, I'll go on," she said miserably. "Yes, I will...." Something within him twisted, and for a moment he wished he had not forced her, wished he could make her stop.

She said, "I don't think you're big any more. If you were, you'd know it. It wouldn't need proving. What you were doing this evening, what you do every Tuesday now, was to prove that you were bigger and stronger than—than Bubbles."

"That," he roared, "will be just about enough of ..." But she went right on talking. He realized, in the midst of his fury, that she had started and would not stop until she was finished. It did not matter how angry he got. It did not matter, even, whether he listened or not. She crouched on the edge of her chair, her head tipped oddly sidewise. Her eyes seemed not to be seeing, and tears crept down her patchy, flushed cheeks. And she went right on talking, crooning, almost.

"Fear means everything to you. I never knew it because I never had to be afraid of you. I worked too hard, did too much. You couldn't be angry at me. Now you are afraid for your job, because of Parks. You are being treated like a little man at work, and it makes you try to be a big man at home. You are afraid.

"You are afraid and you don't have to be, because there are other jobs in town besides the one you have, and because you have done nothing to get fired for. Fear means more to you than good sense. You are ruled by fear and you try to rule by fear. Bubbles is the only one in the world you think you can make afraid, and you're not sure of that so you have to prove it all the time. You were fine and wonderful and big, and now you are small and afraid."

"Stop saying that," he said ominously.

"You are afraid," she droned, "You are afraid."

He rose and clenched his fist.

"Mummy?"

Rosalind entered the kitchen, glowing from her bath. She wore flannel pyjamas and a dressing gown with a crazy zigzag pattern. She went to her mother. "I'm clean," she confided. "Is Daddy

sick?”

Over the child's head, Angela said, “Yes, honey.”

“Bubbles,” said Les hoarsely, “come here.”

Angela held the child's shoulders while she searched his face. Apparently she found what she was looking for. “Go on, cookie,” she murmured.

Les picked up his daughter, who was stiff and puzzled. He set her in his lap and put his arms around her. “Bubbles, tell me something. Tell me the truth. I promise I won't—I won't spank you.” He cleared his throat. “When you do something wrong, I punish you. Right?”

“Uh-huh.”

“Yes. Now, do I always punish you the same? I mean, if you do something bad, like break flowers or spill Mummy's perfume, do I always punish you just as hard?”

“I guess so.”

He licked his lips. “Bubbles, this is awfully important. Tell me the truth. Is there any time when I punish you harder?”

“Yes,” she said gravely. “It's worse on Tuesdays.”

He made a sound that was not a word, and held her tight. He held her so tight that she screwed up her eyes. When he released her she looked at him. “Geel!” she said. She reached over and pulled his nose. She pulled it twice before he could make the noise like the auto horn. How long had it been since they had played that?

He kissed her. “Come on, honey,” said Angela. They went away and left him alone.

The phone rang after a time. Angela was still upstairs. He took the call.

When Angela came back, he was washing the dishes. Angela said nothing. She got a towel and began drying.

“That call,” he said, in an awestruck voice. “It was Bryce.”

“Bryce,” she said, without anything but acknowledgment in her tone.

“He was very polite. The big boss himself.... He asked me what I thought of Parks. I said I thought he was a good accountant. What else could I say? Bryce ... thanked me for my opinion. He apologized for disturbing me at home. Then he told me ...”

“Told you what?” asked Angela, when she could stand the choked silence no longer.

"We're opening a new branch in Calgary," he said. "Until tonight only three men knew about it—a top business secret. Parks is slated to manage the new branch, and he's been around learning all the ropes from ... from...." He shook his head wonderingly, "from 'the best men in the company.' "

He looked at Angela. Her face was still, not smiling, not frowning. "He ... asked me if I wanted to manage the new branch and I told him...." His eyes rested on the cottage curtains, which were not Venetian blinds. "I told him no, I like it just the way it is. He was very ... relieved. He hoped I'd say that. He needs me here. He said he had to ask me because I deserved it." He looked down at her tear-stung, waiting eyes, and said again, "Deserved it." He wagged his head and whispered, "Me."

Abruptly he threw his arms around her, with his wet soapy hands, and buried his face in her hair and the side of her neck. She stood acquiescent, not helping, not hindering. He held on to her and was full of words, bursting with words, and could find hardly a one that was any good. He said at last, "You get afraid too."

She nodded against his cheek without speaking.

"You're pretty small yourself."

"Yes."

"No you're not," he whispered. "No, you're—" But then the words deserted him altogether.

Case and the Dreamer

If, at the very moment Case died, someone had aimed a laser (a tight one, one of the highest intensity ever) at the spot from Earth, and if you could have hidden the beam-front for a thousand years (you couldn't, of course, and anyway, nobody aimed, nobody knew), you might have seen his coffin.

It wasn't meant to be a coffin. Ships have lifeboats when they fail, and the boats have life belts in case they fail, and the coffin had once answered that purpose; but now and for all those centuries, it was and had been Case's coffin.

It lay in lightlessness, its wide-spectrum shrieks of distress forever stilled. It tumbled ever so slowly, pressed long ago by light long gone, because it had never been told to stop.

Case, aged a thousand and some hundred and perhaps a couple of dozen and a fraction (but then, do the dead grow older?), lay in the sealed cylinder, dressed in inboard fatigues (which long ago—even in Case's long ago—had evolved into practically nothing) consisting of barely enough material to carry his brassard: Senior Grade Lieutenant, and the convoluted symbol of his service branch. X_n , it read, once you got past the art: Ex—on many levels: exploration, extrasolar, extragalactic, extratemporal, and more; plus the possibility matrix; expatriate, ex-serviceman, ex-officio, exit ... for on entering X_n , no man made plans for himself—not if they involved any “here,” any “now.” Or anyone.

...

An invisible, intangible something brushed the coffin, just once (for once was enough), and there then appeared something utterly outside Case's experience in all the exploration, all the discovery, all the adventure in his conscious life. It was a stroboscopic flicker which, more swiftly than the eye could comprehend or the brain register, became with each pulse a structure twice as large as it had been before, until it reached a point hardly ten meters away from the tumbling coffin, and stopped, glowing. There was no deceleration in this approach, for there was no motion as motion is understood. With each

pulsation the craft for it was indeed a ship—ceased to exist *here* and reappeared *there*. The distance between *here* and *there* was controllable and could vary widely; it must be so, for the approach (if it can be called an approach, in a vessel which in and of itself never moved) doubled its apparent size except for the last three pulses, during which its “approach” was meters, a meter, some centimeters.

A brief pause, then a disk no larger than a saucer spun out from the seamless hull of the vessel, hovered for a moment near the slowly tumbling coffin, then fell back and around to match its rotation. It placed itself near one end of the coffin and emitted a squirt of flame, and another. The tumbling slowed and, with a third impulse, stopped.

Another pause, while emanations from the ship probed, bathed, searched, touched, tested, checked, and rechecked. Then on the flawless hull appeared a pair of lines and another, transverse, making a rectangle. Inside, the rectangle the hull appeared to dissolve. The tiny saucer moved behind the coffin and made its meticulous squirt, and the coffin moved precisely through the intersection of imaginary diagonals athwart the doorway.

Inside, four columns of pale orange light sprang upward from the deck, supporting and guiding the coffin until it was fully inside, whereupon the rectangular opening hazed over, darkened, became solid, seamless hull again. With a brief, shrill hiss, atmospheric pressure appeared, equalizing the outside of the coffin’s shell with whatever was inside. Then the orange beams turned the coffin and moved it toward a spot on the forward bulkhead that irised open to a corridor, a tall oval in cross-section, glowing with sourceless, shadowless, pale blue-white light. Again a doorway shut behind the coffin, and it was moved smoothly and silently up the corridor, past a row of closed oval doors and shuttered ports, to an open door near the far forward end of the corridor. Here the beams checked the coffin; turned it, and slid it into a room. It came to rest in a space between two banks of equipment. On the left was apparently a control panel of some complex kind, though it carried no switches or knobs, but had instead arrays of small disks floating two handsbreaths away from the panels, each, when activated, glowing with its own hue and with intensity according to the degree of function. On the right was a great bank of indicators. Case (if he had been alive)

would have found the calibrations and indicators incomprehensible.

There appeared on the walkway that now surrounded the coffin a blue man, hooded and gloved, whose body dazzled without being excessively bright, who seemed to be not quite transparent yet not solid, who seemed in some way out of focus. At no time did he touch anything with his small hands, and he moved without a stride—he seemed to glide or slide from place to place.

He stood for a time with his hands behind him and his hooded head bent, regarding the coffin, and then turned to the control bank. Deftly he activated a half-dozen systems by passing his hand between the face of the console and one after another, of the floating disks, each of which lit up. A gate at the front of the room opened and two metal arms, bearing a semicircle of glowing busbar, moved the length of the coffin, down and back. The field of the curved busbar rendered the top half of the coffin transparent. The arms retracted, the gate closed. The blue man made his swift, touchless passes at the console and the various glowing, floating disks faded to dark.

The blue man placed his hands behind his back and stood for a long time regarding the body inside the coffin—the (compared with his own) overlong arms and legs, the hint of bony ridges over the corpse's eyes, the heavy pectoral muscles and the flat stomach. After a time he glided around to the other side of the coffin and inspected that view, the hollow needles still embedded in the antecubitals, the bronze-colored, tonsure-shaped helmet clamped to the head, at the thick hair which tumbled around its edges, and for a long astonished while at that phenomenon, once Case's shame and embarrassment, later his flag of defiance—his beard, which in the last days of his life he had allowed to grow far past the limits imposed by X_n .

The blue man returned to the controls and set up a complex sequence. Again the gate at the front of the room opened, and a new device trundled out and approached the coffin. It looked like a fair segment of a planetarium, a multiple projector studded with gimballled lenses and the housings of small and highly diverse field generators, together with a positioning frame and sets of folded, tool-bearing arms. The telescopic legs arched and straddled the coffin, and positioned the projector over it. Urged by the sure, fleet hands of the blue man, the projector came alive

with thread-like beams, some visible and brilliant, blue, gold, scarlet; some invisible but faintly shrill in the thin atmosphere which the room had assumed to match that inside the coffin. These beams were probes and stimulators, pressors and tractors, gauges and analyzers, samplers and matchers and testers.

Without pause, now, they reached their summations and took further action. Mechanical hands searched and solved the seals. Gases were mixed and injected while the atmosphere in the chamber was matched in quality and kind and pressure (a process which had no effect whatever on the blue man) and then the seals were cracked, the coffin opened. While the body remained where it was, the opened coffin sank away to and through the deck. Case's corpse seemed to be floating in midair, which it was not, for although gravity had not yet been applied, it was held from drifting or shifting by the tractor beams, while the crouching machine tapped the tubes from the needles in Case's arms, severing them as the coffin dropped away, replacing their contents with something new. The same process was used on the small bronze helmet, all its leads analyzed, duplicated, tapped, and the original severed and discarded. A diathermic field adjusted the body's temperature, through and through, and all at once, tubed needles snaked out to the groin, the abdominal cavity, the sides of the neck. Warm fluids began coursing through them while pressor beams gently manipulated the joints, the muscles, the chest.

... and suddenly Case sat up, but you can't sit up afloat in midair supported by intangible columns of force and entangled by needle-pointed tubes, electrodes, probes. Even so, his movement was so sudden and so violent that the swift reflexes of the blue man, the built-in fail-safes of the systems, could not prevent his wild angry flailing and his tortured shout, "*Jan!*" But that was as far as he got before the massive tranquilizer hit his brain and he relaxed, sleeping.

Two tubes were gently replaced.

A broken hollow needle was extracted and another put in.

And a sleeping man is not a dead man. *Let him sleep*, said the master computer, and the blue man dissolved away and the lights dimmed, and Case slept.

"*Jan!*"

Tortured and hoarse, yes, but it had not been like the syllable that tore his throat and half his mind, mingled with the continuing crash of his chemical jets, abetted by the crush of acceleration, a multiple of anguish and loss and terror and love and fatigue (he hadn't known about the love before) on that terrible launch, the last before he died. There were the lifebelts, the coffins, side by side on the escarpment where he and Jan had dragged them, where they had tumbled in barely ahead of capture by the—by the—(a thought missing here: occluded, forgotten ...?) and—and—

And his craft was launched, and hers had not.

No-one, not ever anywhere, no one has been so helpless, so furious. Programming in the escape belts was so simple it was implacable; he himself had set up the sequences, he himself had taken the irrevocable precaution of locking them in, of tying his command controls to hers, of canceling any possible override. And—

And his craft had launched, and hers had not, had not, had not.

Jan!

Case slept on in the dimness, apparently free-floating, actually caged by gentle, unbreakable beams. After enough hours (the master computer knew exactly the meaning of "enough"), the sourceless light increased, and with it, the figure of the blue man appeared and gained its almost-density. Moving to the console, the blue man activated certain of the telltales on the opposite bulkhead and studied them. Apparently satisfied, he turned back, made a number of careful adjustments, and then passed his hand behind a master-switch disk.

Immediately a deep hum began; grew in intensity until checked by the blue man's intangible hand, and then began to rise in pitch, fall again, rise and steady. It began to pulsate: eleven, fourteen, sixteen cycles ... eighteen ... and there it held. Then began a series of matching tones, high harmonics, multiples, tones set apart by fractions to set up beat frequencies; these in turn orchestrated to the heavy subsonics, the entire structure of sound constantly self-adjusting to itself and to the readouts connected through Case's bronze helmet, until at last the whole living sonority was tailored exactly to him, to the emanations of his brain, the doorways of his mind, the subtle temporal cells, the

neurons and synapses of his brain.

Case was no longer asleep. This was something far deeper.

Something began to press against the integument of his mind, gently, irresistibly, until it dissolved the wall and entered. It sought out those storage cells as yet unoccupied, meticulously respecting treasures and privacies, looking into nothing, asking only space to lay down new learning. Once this was found, it withdrew, leaving (remember: all is figure) a line into each compartment.

Now there swiftly flowed through these lines new knowledge and new ideation. Language. Idiom. The ideological, analogical, mythological underbracing of idiom. Case was given everything a colleague and contemporary of the blue man might be expected to have, except knowledge of himself and his current situation. That he would get in his own way, in his own time: the ultimate courtesy.

The hypnotic sound faded. The lights changed slightly. The blue man put his hands behind his back and waited.

Case awoke.

There is no end to the wonders of the universe, and no acrobatics of the imagination through time and space are needed to find them. A twentieth-century man could, if he would, spend half a lifetime in learning all there is to be learned about a square foot of topsoil, six inches deep. He would find animals and insects with marvelous abilities, able to speak languages of scent as well as sound; whole generations of aggression and defense; fungi capable of weaving nooses quick and strong enough to snap around a salamander, ingenious enough then to wrap and digest it. On the microphysical level are the endlessly subtle phenomena of solution and suspension, of freeze and thaw, while the living things encapsulate and encyst and metamorphose ... no end of wonders.

Consider then the cattle tick. Hatching in the ground, she sheds and grows and sheds and grows some more, and sheds and mates. At last, carrying within her the encapsulated sperm, she climbs. Eyeless, she is yet guided to climb upward until she finds a limb-tip where she clings until her reflexes are fired by a single, special spark: the odor of butyric acid, which is found in the sweat of warm-blooded mammals. At that, she leaps and, if she misses,

will climb patiently again and find another tip, and hang there waiting. She has been known to hang there for *eighteen years*—and yet will react instantly and fully in the presence of the one thing she is equipped to take and designed to need. She will feed for a day, whereupon she releases the sperm she has hoarded to the eggs she carries. She falls then and dies, and the fertilized eggs are ready to take up the cycle.

Her life, then, is composed of instants and episodes (as is yours) and could you communicate with her, she might recall episodes: the second shedding, the mating, the climb, the leap, the wait, through drought, freeze, drench, windstorm—why, that was another instant, another moment, for during that time she could be called alive only by nearly misusing the word; it was another instant, and less memorable than that first plunge into warm blood.

Case's first awakening, then, was but an instant after that terrible launch (for he could, but would not remember the long despair during which he gave himself to the belt's life-support, life-suspension systems). He might have forgone these through grief and fury had not his own emergency programming been as implacable and unforgiving as that he had laid onto the belts, unconscious, automatic, indelible.

(But hers didn't launch, didn't launch.)

Therefore Case awoke (the first time) but an instant after that terrible wrench; therefore his hoarse cry; therefore he was the only human being in all the universe who could remember so distant an event as the escape from that hellish unknown planet; and to him it was not distant at all. For such is the nature of time, that a man's clock and a man's soul might give him true measurements, but the truth need not be the same. If you are to understand Case, you must understand this.

So it was that he knew time had passed when he awoke the second time; he knew he had been asleep. He knew he felt well and rested, and that he was hungry and thirsty. He did not know where he was, and when he tried to sit up he could not.

"Lie still," said the blue man. "Don't try to move while I get those needles out of you."

Case's first disobedient reflex was to move, fast and hard. When he again found he couldn't, he saw the sense of it and relaxed. The blue man made quick, sure passes at the console, and a piece

of equipment glided out of the bulkhead somewhere beyond his head, came to him, extended glittering gentle arms and tools and drew the tubes, applied cool creams, released, untied, removed the various devices which had given him back his life (and all trace that they had ever been there) while he lay wondering what language the blue man had spoken—and how it was that he could understand it.

The equipment slid away from him and traveled to its gate in the forward bulkhead, which swallowed it. Case lay still, looking up at the blue man, whose hooded, concealed face could tell him nothing, but whose relaxed, hands-behind-back pose was one of watchful waiting. Mysterious, yes. Menacing, no.

Case moved tentatively, found no restraints, sat up. He sat on nothing visible and, looking down, found himself apparently afloat a meter above the deck. He had a second of vertigo, which passed as the blue man, with instant understanding, waved at a control. Case was immediately supported and surrounded by the soft, firm chair which faded in around him. He sat up straight, looked at the arms, around at the back, and then at the blue man, whose calming gesture was commanding enough, to cause him to lean back—watchful of course, but no longer alarmed.

“Lieutenant Hardin ...”

Case blinked. It was so long, even as he knew time, since he had heard that name that he had all but forgotten it was his. It was a little like being called by one’s middle name, never having used it publicly before. “I’m usually called Case,” he said. “And who are you?”

A pause, then the blue man (faceless, but with a smile in his voice) said, “There really is no simple answer to that question. For the time being; just call me the Doctor.”

“Doctor.” The word meant the right thing as he said it, but felt unfamiliar to his tongue and throat. “Doctor,” he said again in his own (old) language. That felt better but he could sense it meant nothing to the blue man.

“That’s right,” said the Doctor, “you’ve learned a new language—new to you, very ancient to me.”

The idea of hypnogogia—sleep-learning—was not unfamiliar to Case, though he had never experienced anything as—well, *finished* as this. Learning and using information by hypnogogia had always been an instant translation (or rapid analog) process

to him: think “cat” and come out with “gleep,” or whatever the appropriate word was in the learned system. In this case, he was thinking in the new language. Yet if he wished to use his old one, he could merely by decision, and without special effort. All gain, no loss.

Case closed his eyes. Did his new language have words for grief and anger and self-detestation? Yes, it had. Gratitude? *Saved my life* ... There is this about dying anguished: that the anguish dies with you, and the pain. What then if you are revived, and with you, the anguish? This is what mattered at the moment, not a stupid “Where am I?” He was on a ship, which had picked him up. Whose ship, bound for where? That mattered too, but—not yet. Gratitude ...?

There were a million questions to ask, and nine hundred thousand of them conflicted with his conditioning: to give no information unless he must, and on certain matters, no information at all.

“You were the executive officer on the X_n ship *Outbound*,” said the Doctor, “an Explorer class discovery vessel launched from Terra Central on a mission to penetrate the galactic arm and make certain experiments in intragalactic space, among them being to test a new version of the flicker-field mode of faster-than-light travel. A design error caused the vessel to accelerate out of control to velocities exceeding anything regarded at the time as theoretically possible. Compounding the *Outbound* disaster was the ship’s ability to gather intergalactic hydrogen molecules for fuel, which, at the unexpected velocities, caused an increment exceeding expenditure of fuel. The only possible result must have been an explosion or other disruption of the vessel. What actually happened is not known, because by the time it happened the ship was far outside any possibility of detection.”

Case felt a flash of irritation. “If you’ve picked all this out of my head already, why go over it?”

Gently the Doctor said, “We took nothing from you, Case. We respect personal integrity above all other things, and the privacy of a man’s choices are his own. No: what I have just said came from the archives.”

Archives. Not files or retrieval banks—archives. “How long were we—was the *Outbound*, lost?”

“By Terra Central reckoning—some twelve hundred years.”

"I couldn't have been suspended for twelve hundred years!"

"You weren't. You died."

After a time the Doctor said, "Would you like to be by yourself?"

"If you don't mind," Case whispered.

The blue man faded and disappeared: Case saw this, but could only stare dully.

Jan. Oh, Jan ...

His mind then for a while was a wordless throb. Deep in his mind, where lives the observer all of us carry—the merciless one who stands off watching—was name-calling: *Idiot! Sentimental slob! Why is it a greater grief to you to know she is a thousand years dead than a mere two hundred? And angry, are you? Angry! What are you going to do with your anger?*

"Something," he whispered. "Something ..."

He flicked a slitted glance around. There was nothing in this bland place to strike out against, so with one blow he fisted his palm so hard he numbed it; and while waiting for it to begin to ache, he saw in memory a flash of ugly laughter. It was laughter all but standing alone, mouthless, deep, cheerful—the cheerfulness of a man with a better mousetrap; and Case (and Jan, and Jan) the mice. Why couldn't he remember the mouth, the face, the situation? For he saw this laugh in memory, he did not hear it.

Occlusion—the profound will not to remember. Occlusion is an act of survival, an unwillingness to replay some terrible shock. Yet occluded matter always leaves a trigger in plain sight (here, a visible laugh) and that is also a survival trait; for the deep mind wants always to know where the danger is, and what to fear. To be as close to his deep mind as Case was (his training had made him so) was to tread always the edge of internal terrors, to be placed always at the point of decision: shall I recall the trauma? or bury the trigger again?—for only at this edge did he have the ability to react with the fabled swiftness of the X_n Corps.

He let the trigger, the laugh, fade and closed his eyes, commanding some alternative to come to mind. Anything. Anything else, anything instead. Something, perhaps, before the laughter.

Something like: before the laughter was the chase, and before

that the landing, and before that the lifeboat, and before that ... before that no one would ever know, because they had abandoned ship in the flickering grayness of transligh velocity, under or over, who knew? There was no instrumentation for that, and no instruments told the truth anyway; electrons flowed in strange ways, coils and fields were distorted and wild. No one had ever been there before, no probe had ever reported back. Scuttlebutt, off-duty talk: What would happen to you if you bailed out of a ship at faster-than-light velocities? They said, as you reach it time approaches zero and mass approaches infinity. Achilles and the tortoise; as logic approaches perfection, truth approaches zero. Someone said C (the terminal velocity) was a gateway into another universe, or another phase in phased space. Some said, death and dissolution, for all the electrical phenomena of biochemistry would, with all the rules of physics, be so changed that organization of matter and of life would be disrupted. And some said no: transformation phenomena (mass into energy into space into time, each proportionately interchangeable) might retain *pattern*, and some inconceivably different form of life might be possible. Over it all was the certainty that to bail out, away from the guarding life-support, artificial gravity, and all the other tissues of the man-made womb that was a spaceship, would be expulsion into something utterly strange and hostile. Bailing out in the stratosphere, with 95 percent of the atmosphere underneath one, and a temperature drop of perhaps two hundred degrees ... the name of that is Lethal. Multiply it by what, then, in space, in that strange country where time itself might turn on its tail?

And always the other argument: that velocity itself is not a commanding factor; that early in the days of railroading wise men said that the ears would bleed, the sight would fail, the blood be unable to circulate at twenty miles an hour; and that all the talk of C was the same logical untruth; speed has no absolute, velocity is always relative, and that the only danger in bailing out is the matter of being a hell of a way from anywhere.

Well, Case had found out (with Jan, with Jan) by doing it, and it hadn't taught him a thing, except maybe that one can live through it. Not how, not what happened to them. The shrill alarm, the echoing-everywhere voice saying *abandon*, the clutch of fear on the way to his assigned lifeboat station when the mail

hull started to buckle and the airtight barrier slammed down between him and his boat (and a good thing too; that whole section of the ship cracked away and exploded outward, boats and all) and the lights gone, the gravity gone, the wild scramble through familiar-unfamiliar gates and corridors to his alternate station, where he tumbled through the hatch (on top of someone else, he didn't know who) and kicked out and squirmed around, treading the other as he craned back to the corridor to see if anyone else was coming; but then, you couldn't see. If there was or was not, his conscience was clear (though his regret could never be) for the automatic override canceled his manual launch controls, and he fell back into the lifeboat as it clanged shut and banged away from the ship. The boat's inertia-field took over at launch and saved them the terrible agony of acceleration, but its vibratory effect, chiming down the scale, was an agony of its own. His shipmate was as preoccupied with this as he, and the only thing he could clearly recall was a spinning glimpse of the ship with a ragged cavity in its midsection—the first part to blow off, the part that had contained his lifeboat station—limned in flickering arcs as the ruptured power cables lashed and vomited.

Probably they were both unconscious for a time. Case remembered a hazy inspection of the instruments, which had no useful information for him at all, except that the craft was sound and that its converter was picking up a reasonable amount of usable atomic hydrogen, so that fuel and life-support would not be a problem. Almost detachedly he watched his hands on the controls, running through the implanted checklist, setting the computer to hunt for a ship and/or a terrestrial planet, the drive to maximum (the computer would not use maximum, but in that setting, max. was available), and the life-support complex: on, with alarms. A touch on one control took inventory of all stores and reported them complete. Another applied spin. The lifeboat had the contours of a shark with an exaggerated dorsal fin. The body contained stores, converters, fuel; the fin was instrumentation and living quarters for six. Spin was on the long axis; subjective "down" was therefore in the tip of the fin.

All snug, all safe.

No hope.

Plenty of room, plenty of food and air for six. With two, it was palatial.

He looked at last at the other one—not that he hadn't cared before, but because his ingrained priorities were condition first, personnel second.

His first reaction had to do with all the people it wasn't. It wasn't Old Growl, the captain, or that funny little Henny from the black gang, or Bowker, who had always puzzled him and whom he'd always wanted to know better when he could get around to it, or Mary Dee, who had never found out that he had liked her better walking away, such was her hair, such was her face. This was one of the background faces, one of the others, you know, the people that make up the bulk of the roster in your memory of one or another school you went to once. Gander, Dancer, something like that. Janssen. XBC, xenobiochemist, usually found in a corner with two or three others from Science Section, talking shop. Correction. Listening to other people talking shop.

"Janifer?"

"Janocek." She sat with an elbow hooked around a soft stanchion, where she had anchored herself before spin. She had apparently been watching the checkout intently, following it step by step. Case outranked her; the conditioning would defer to him but make her miss nothing of the routine. Clearly, at this moment they both felt the weight of the programming leave them. Optimum conditioning takes care of essentials—down to the finest detail, true—but then it stops. They were on their own.

"Case Hardin, Lieutenant S.G.," he said.

"Yes, sir, I know." There was a foolish pause. He should have known she knew. There were more ratings than officers on a ship. To the ratings, the officers were never a, well, sea of faces. And his "S.G." hung pompously in the air between them. Her eyes were long almonds, so bright they were opaque (but, one realized, not from the inside), and her hair was drawn back almost painfully tight from a seamless brow. She was slender, tall (both just this side of "too"), and there was an odd, controlled quality in her voice, as if it were kept in the middle register by a conscious effort. She asked, "What happened?"

He shrugged and nodded at the telltales. No ship, no boats, no planet, no sun anywhere. Some debris, dwindling as their launch took them away; nothing large enough to have saved or sheltered anyone, else the computer would have it reported. As they spun, a paleness washed across the screens: the end of the arm of a

distant galaxy. Case touched a control and fixed a view of it. "Nobody tells the ratings anything," she observed.

"They don't tell a lieutenant much either. We were testing a new drive. Theoretically it wouldn't work in gravitic fields of a certain density, so we headed for deep space with a conventional drive. By the numbers, we were okay; the math section gave us a factor of safety of three or better; I mean, we were three times as far into intergalactic space as we needed to be safe. Well—they were wrong, or the design was wrong, or they did something wrong on the bridge. They cut in the new drive, and couldn't turn it off. Nothing could turn it off. It was working outside our power supply, beyond control. We just accelerated until we broke up."

"And there's no one—"

"No one."

They found themselves looking at one another. What was happening behind the shine of those long eyes? *Why you?* Or was she mourning someone? For a second he had a deep flash of regret; he did not gossip, he did not pry, he never watched other people's affections and partnerings and personal peccadillos. Case had a searching and hungry mind, but it was pointed at the job, the responsibility, the mission; a deliberate repression of his own wants and an earnest subjugation to those of his superiors, and theirs. He was a good officer. Whether or not he was known as a good man had never concerned him. And ... perhaps it need not concern him now. He was half the population, and the ranking half at that. There wasn't anyone else for her to set standards and comparisons by, and from the looks of things, there wouldn't be. He sighed (why?) and turned away from her. He had nothing to recollect about her. He would have to start knowing her from scratch, from this point forward, while she ... well, she knew who he was. In his world, one was used to living in close quarters with other people—there were so many of them, everywhere. But because there were so many, there was always a choice. But now ...

He turned to the console, latched out the saddle and sat down. He stared glumly at the faint stain of stardust that was a galaxy—who knew which one—and the blackness everywhere else—and hopelessly set up the computation for its distance. Eight hundred light-years, nine? Something like that, surely. The boat could accelerate to a fraction of C —a large fraction, to be sure, but still

a fraction—and the suspension gear might keep them alive for a minimum of two, a maximum five hundred years.

Of course, the boat was equipped to care for six; but could the life-suspension systems be manifolded, so that they could revive and use new gear before the old ones were played out? Would the unused systems be effective after that length of time?

He glanced over his shoulder. His biochemist might have some answers. But first—some numbers.

Expertly he flicked the computer commands, demanding the range and distance of the nearest planetary body. In scanning a galactic cloud, even at eight hundred light-years, the computer could only operate in an area of probability—to lay in a course to a point in the cloud where terrestrial planets were most likely to be, and terrestrial planets are not *likely* to be anywhere. He set the computer to seeking, and turned away from it. He had at last done everything he could, and he hated that, dreaded it. There was now nothing left but to face the whole matrix of things he had never concerned himself with nor trained himself for; for which no conditioning had ever been offered him and for which a single word—infrarational—had been a big enough discard bag for him. He was trained to confront problems, not people, not a person, not, for that matter, himself. He turned to confront it, her, himself, and she was crying, and she said, “We’re going to die, aren’t we?”

Everything about her, body and voice and eyes, asked only a simple answer, a denial, and he didn’t have it for her. He never thought of lying (that’s for those who knew more about people than he knew) and it never occurred to him to touch her, which would have served quite well, for she could have made her own interpretation. He said, “I guess so, Janifer,” and even got her name wrong.

“Doctor.”

The sourceless light increased and the blue man appeared. “I’m hungry,” Case said.

“In the chair,” said the Doctor. “Are you feeling better?”

Case knew what the Doctor knew from the wide array of telltales, and that it was not his physical condition that was the subject of the query. But “better”?

He said, “After the ship broke up I escaped in a lifeboat with a

rating, a Janet Janocek, xenomicrobiologist.” The wide soft arm of the chair slitted open and uncovered a one-liter warm sucker. Like the wheel and the needle, the sucker’s design is impervious to centuries. He pulled strongly at it and swallowed. It was bland (he could understand this; tastes do change, and the whole posture of his—captor?—host? was to present, not to enforce) but satisfying. He eyed it and had another pull. He said, “I can’t remember what happened after we realized we were beyond help, out of range, with no reason to hope.”

“You were picked up in a ’belt—you called it a coffin. What happened to the lifeboat?”

“Oh, that was smashed up on the landing.”

The Doctor did not comment, but waited. Case said, “I mean, I can’t remember what we did all those days, 104 of them....” What he meant was that he wanted to remember them in order, every hour and minute, because now they were precious, priceless, and because now he could not understand why, except for, certain vivid scenes, they were at the time a succession of gray on grays to be lived through. Because this was *Jan* he was with, *Jan*. Whatever she was later, she did not become: she *was* that, was when he watched her cry that once, sat watching her with his useless hands pressed between his knees, miserably, watching her cry until she stopped. Then the days ... ship’s time said they were days; and you can sleep just so much and spend so much time in the tingler (had she used everything in the tingler? He had. Oh, Jan!) and then you check the console and enter “Ditto” in the log, and then there’s nothing else to do but confront the other person and you just don’t know how!

And all the while, he thought with a kind of awe, this was Jan. Thus it is when anguish and grief loop back on themselves. He wished he had it to do over, terror and hopelessness and all; a small price for those 104 days, now that he knew who she was. Had been.

“I remember,” said Case, almost smiling, “Jan’s starting a discussion with me about living, about staying alive—about *why*. Why did we keep a log and check the console and do the active and passive exercises and the tingler and all—why, when we knew we were going to die? And all I could say was, what’s changed? What’s the difference, really, between what we were doing and what we had always done? We knew where we were

going to die—right in that lifeboat, when the time came, but otherwise we were just like everyone else, everywhere, trying to stay alive as long as possible. I knew she hadn't wanted to die a hundred days ago and I knew she didn't want to die this minute, and neither did I. But why now? She demanded an answer to that; it was just something she didn't know. And I said I didn't know either, but that everyone ever born has been under a death sentence just for having been born, and the fact that for us there was no hope did not change anything; hope makes life easier but it does not make life impossible; millions upon millions have lived long lives without it. And this discussion was on the hundred and second day, and the hooter started up." And at last Case did smile.

"The hooter."

"Collision alarm, condition yellow. Somehow out there we were coming up on something, or something was coming up on us. It was enormous, it shouldn't have appeared as it did, so close and without previous warning, but it did, and don't ask me for explanations.

"It was a planet, larger than Luna and almost as large as Terra. I shouldn't have said 'planet' because there was no primary, but you'll understand why I call it that.

"I thought Jan would cry again. Maybe she did. I was busy at the console.

"I probed for atmosphere—the object was big enough. Negative. I got it on the screen, and read the range, and I couldn't believe it. To appear so quickly, it had to be approaching from ahead, adding velocities ... and even then, it should have been detected days before. But it wasn't ahead, it was angling in from the left. I computed the angle; it was only two hundred and fifty thousand kilometers away and intersection was a little over thirty hours. I got magnification on the screen ... a rocky spheroid, but by radar alone I couldn't tell much more than that."

(And Jan had said; "Please ... oh, please ..." and when he turned to look at her she was standing with her hands over her ears: "Please turn off the hooter, Case.")

Case did not explain to the Doctor why he had smiled again. "I needed light to make any kind of survey, but out there there was nothing, not even starlight. I remember thinking again that anything that size would have to have some sort of atmosphere, if

only hydrogen falling in or orbital dust, so I probed again and got a positive.”

“Your instruments—” said the Doctor.

“My instruments were wrong,” interrupted Case, “or I used them wrong, or a lot of things happened I can’t explain. All I can do is to tell you what happened.”

Detecting Case’s irritation, the Doctor raised small, shimmering hands. “Please.”

“Or what I remember,” mumbled Case. “Maybe they’re not the same thing....”

He took another pull on the sucker and swallowed and said: “I set up the spectros for analysis and that’s one thing I won’t ever forget—the readout for Earth Normal. It said 0.9, and then it waited and threw in another nine, and after a bit three more: 0.99999. That’s mean temperature and pressure as well as composition, and I doubt Terra itself would give you a reading like that. And there’s something about the way those nines came up that’s important, that I can’t quite get my hand on ... I don’t know.” He shifted, picked up the sucker, put it down again. “I got some sleep then, six hours, leaving Jan on watch with orders to wake me and take her six. We didn’t know what we were in for and we wanted to be rested.

“When she woke me we had light. The planet, planetoid, whatever, it had light. It looked like those old photographs of Venus, when she was first observed, before the cloud-cover was dispersed. The radar pix were the same as before, nearer now, but the opticals showed unbroken clouds. The velocities were so nearly matched that I could trust the iron mike to hang an orbit. I left a running check on the nature of that light. It was white, more or less—a mix; it came from the clouds.

“We slid into orbit nice as you please, and dropped in close enough so the spin was an embarrassment. I set the boat into a tail-in attitude with the big fin leading, and a steady one-G deceleration, which made it comfortable for us and easier on the sensors.

“You can’t expect full and sophisticated instrumentation and controls on a lifeboat, but what we had was good and I used it to the limit. We had all the time we needed and the velocities were so well matched that the transition from orbital to controlled flight situations was made as gently and pleasantly as any

textbook tour-boat ever did. I lost the red-alert feeling, canceled the six-on, six-off watches, and spent most of my waking time on the scans. Jan said she would make a report about the way I handled it.”

(Jan watched everything he did—well, of course, it was such a change from those other weeks; and she jumped to do anything he asked her for; and one day she said suddenly, “Case, you’re wonderful, you know that? And nobody knows but me. I’ve got to tell them, somehow I’ve got to tell them.” This disturbed him far more than any unbelievable planetoid, and he had nodded to her and turned back to his console, glad he had something else to fix on. After that she spent a lot of her off-watch time murmuring into a voicewriter.)

“I set a spiral so gradual and so matched to the atmosphere densities that frictional heating was not a problem, only useful. We braked with it, we used the heat for hydrogen treatment; actually, I do believe we landed with full tanks because of that, not that it did us any good.... We reoriented, nose parallel and hung on the horizon, fin up and the living quarters gimbaled over so that for us and the boat there was up and down again. We circled the planetoid in the high stratosphere—or what would be a stratosphere on Terra—and mapped.

“Once into the cloud cover we found that it was just that—a cover. The air underneath was clear, with occasional ... drifting cumulus; the weirdest thing of all, though, was that, from the underside, the cover was illuminated only on one half. I mean, imagine a hollow sphere, half black and half white, and call the white the illuminated part. The planetoid is inside this sphere, and the sphere rotates around it, so that even without a primary, the surface has day-and-night phases.

“I picked a number of likely spots and finally selected one. It was a long, narrow, sandy plain, like a beach, at the edge of a large lake, with forest—oh yes, there was vegetation—on the other side. It seemed fairly level and we could land on it with a clear run to get off again. I ran a full check on the manuals and then took over. I made fourteen, fifteen trial approaches before I lowered the gear and went in.

“You have to understand, the lifeboat was no kind of airfoil. She came in on what we called stilts—supporting jets—and maintained attitude with gyros. I was practically sitting on the

stilts at ten meters altitude, and I had forward velocity down to about fifteen meters per second. A crawl. And then there was this terrible noise and we fell over sideways.”

(A tearing scream, edged, stabbing, and Jan’s screaming with it, and—and his too, he screamed: to be falling, to know in that split second that the boat was gone, that hope, born again, was gone again; and as they toppled, that other sound, that other terrible sound that made them scream again when terror overrode despair....)

“It was a small lifeboat, but small is ...” He spread his hands. “There were tons of it all the same, and it fell over and I could hear the hull plates crumpling and turning back. I think the two left-side stilts, fore and aft, cut out, and the two right ones added to the topple and she lay over on her side and slid and ruined herself. And when the fin levered over and hit the sand we were thrown so hard we hit the bulkhead, restraints and all—they pulled right out, they were never built for such a lurch from the side as that.

“It was night, that crazy kind of night, when I came out of it. I was lying on the sand with my head on Jan’s lap and she was wiping my face with something cold.”

(And breathing used-up little *hics*, dry catches at the long, far end of weeping. She’d been thrown clear, right out through a rapture in the fin, and in time had found him dangling against the outside of the boat by his restraints, with his blood painting down the bent plates. She had got him down somehow and then had gone off to the beach with a bit of foam insulation which she dipped in the water and brought back. When he got his wits about him he gave her hell for maybe inoculating him with God-knows-what from alien water. Her response, astonishingly, was to fall instantly asleep.)

“I hurt all down my life side, especially, the skull and my hip, both scraped badly and bruised. Jan was shaken up and for a while, two days or so, I was afraid of internal injuries because she vomited a lot and moaned in her sleep. Then I guess we both got sick for a while, a fever and blurred vision; it is asking a lot of the biosystem to be thrust unprotected into an alien environment, even a kindly one.”

(Kindly. Cool at night, warm in the daytime, clean air, on the high side of oxygenation. Potable water. It could have been worse

—if that had been all there was to it. When there was more to it, it was worse.)

“It was at the end of the third day, as nearly as I can recall, that we shook off the sickness and were able to take a good look at the situation. We were bruised and hungry, but we were out of shock. Jan told me she had been having dreams—a dream, I should say, vivid and recurrent: a device like hands, sorting and shuffling cards, laying them out, gathering them up, shuffling and laying them out again, and she was the pack of cards. I would not mention that or even remember it if she hadn’t described it so forcefully and so often. I had my own, too; but then, fever, you know—” He made a wiping-away gesture.

“What were the dreams, Case?” asked the Doctor, and quickly added, “if you don’t mind—” because Case dropped the sucker, clamped his hands together, frowned down into them.

“I don’t mind ... although it’s not very clear any more; I tried too hard for too long not to remember, I guess.” He paused, then: “Hard to grasp, and any words I use are like approximations, but ... I seemed to be suspended from some kind of filament. One end was inside me, somehow, and the other was high up, in, shadows. Circling around me were eyes. Not pairs of eyes or one pair, but I forget the arrangement. And I realized that the eyes weren’t circling me, but whatever held the filament up there was twirling it while the eyes watched, and then there was—”

“Yes?” The prompting was very gentle.

“Laughing,” said Case, and he whispered, “Laughing.” He looked up at the Doctor. “Did I tell you about that noise just before we crashed?”

“You mentioned a noise.”

“Partly it was the gyro bearings,” said Case. “I found that out later, after the hull broke up and I had a chance to look at the drive sector. You had to see that to believe it. The only way I can describe it is to ask you to imagine all the bearing assemblies—every one of them, mind you—while turning at max, instantaneously turned solid, welded into one piece. The shafts had wrung big ragged holes in the mounts, and it was these spinning down, tearing everything apart down there, that made most of the screaming. The rest was Jan, well, and me too, and —”

The Doctor waited.

“—laughing,” Case said at length, and, “I don’t think it was a real sound. Jan said she heard it too, but it wasn’t a real sound.... Words are no good, sometimes. Whatever we heard; it wasn’t with our ears.” He closed his eyes and shook briefly. The laughter. That laughter.

Not Case’s laughter; Case was not a laughing man.

“We were hungry. I boosted her back into the cabin—the rupture was too high off the ground for me to get in by myself, and she rummaged around looking for something to eat. She drew a blank. Lifeboats are designed for survival in space, not for planetfall. Suckers and their contents are—were—constituted from raw elements which were useless to us without processing, and we had no power to process. There was a lot of shouting back and forth while I tried to find a way for her to override the fail-safes that had shut down the power when the boat careened, but nothing worked. She threw down whatever she thought would be useful—seat cushions and a big soft sheet of head-lining and some rod stock and other junk, and the first-aid case, which we didn’t appreciate much until later, but as I said, we were *hungry*. I don’t think either one of us had ever known that feeling before and we just didn’t like it.

“Jan had read that fruits could be eaten without preparation and told me about it, so we left the ship and went across the sand to the vegetated zone. The sand felt strange to my feet, not unpleasant, but painful as we moved into the soil and rock and undergrowth. The little branches lashed at our bodies; some of them had sharp points on them that scratched. We found one great bank of plants heavy with little round red fruits that Jan said were berries. She ate some and we waited for a time, but there were no ill effects so she got some for me. We also found what seemed to be large fruits, but on breaking them open, discovered that they were full of small crescent-shaped constructs with casings so hard we couldn’t break them. We brought a few of these back with us and cracked them against the hull plates with a stone. They were very good, very nourishing. We slept.”

(They slept on the sand and were cold, until Jan got the piece of soft head-lining and covered them. The heat of their bodies was trapped by it and kept them warm. It was a new experience for both, both having lived their lives virtually without clothes, in controlled environments, and sleeping weightless with a gentle

restraint or supported by pressor fields.)

“The next day we went the other way to find food, to the lake. Jan went out into the water and washed her whole body in it, and called me. Since we no longer had the tingler I joined her. It was not the same, but not completely unpleasant either, and we did feel a lot better afterward. Up the beach a little way were rocks thrusting out of the water, and on them grew great clusters of bony things that Jan called bivalves. They weren’t easy to get off the rocks, and once touched they closed up tight; but we developed a skill with a bit of stone and a quiet approach, and managed to harvest a number of them. To swallow one at first was nauseating, but it was what you might call an acquired taste, and soon we were eating enthusiastically. It was while we were up there that the boat began to break up.”

Case looked up at the Doctor, standing patiently before him, but as usual his glance told him nothing. “It made a terrible noise, the plates shearing like that, and as we ran down the beach we could see it settling. It was just as if it lay in soft mud, but it didn’t; the sand under it was as solid as what we ran on, and dry. All the same, it was sinking, and breaking up. I’m telling you what I saw, what I remember,” he said defensively. The Doctor inclined his head and made a wordless motion for Case to continue. “I can’t help it,” Case grumbled. “It’s what happened.” When the blue man still did not respond, he went on:

“The nose and tail were crushed and sunk into the sand, and there were three new breaks in the hull. That’s when I saw the gyro bearings I told you about. The boat looked as if a giant had taken it by the two ends and bent it over his knee. The fin was flat on the ground now, and I looked in through the broken plates, and then while Jan screamed at me not to, I scrambled inside. It was a mess, the way she’d said it was, and worse. Nothing answered on the console except the Abandon matrix and indicator lights showing that four, of the six lifeboats were ready for launch and the other two inoperative. I touched one of them and a ‘belt launched from the wreck, shot across the beach and crashed at the edge of the forest where it exploded and set fire to the trees and drove Jan half into hysteria. I tried to shut down the matrix but the controls failed to respond, so I backed out—into Jan, who was afraid something had happened to me. I ordered her out. I suppose I was fairly forceful, it stopped the

hysteria ... and got out myself and ran around the hull. All of the launch ports had opened—two were all but underground. I crawled into the third one, where the coffin had just launched, and it was still hot, and Jan began screaming at me again, and I didn't care, I went for the leads from the control center and ripped them off, and then crawled back to the launch booster and began to pull and pry at the release toggles. They came up and the coffin slid out on its rails and fell to the sand. I got into the space where it had been and was able to reach the control leads of Number Three. I had no trouble with the releases on that one but it would not slide all the way out; it just nosed into the sand. Because of that I couldn't get to Four. Five and Six were the ones the board had said were inoperative, and it didn't make any difference anyhow; they were underground.

"The hull plates overhead somewhere made a tremendous crackle; I can't tell you what it was like inside there; it was as if the noise was inside my head. The whole structure settled, and I can't tell you how I got out—I found myself on the sand outside Number Three just in time to see Jan trying to crawl into Number One, screaming again. I grabbed her around the hips and snatched her out (she screamed louder than ever until she realized what had grabbed her; she thought I was still inside and was going in to pull me out. That Jan, she was—she—)

"Well ...

"Number Two coffin was free and clear; Three was still half in and half out, and I realized that if the boat settled much more it would carry the coffin with it. I got hold of it, lifting and pulling. Jan immediately saw what was needed and helped me, and we got the coffin free. We fell back on the sand gasping and sobbing for breath, just used up—or so we thought until the lifeboat seemed to ... well, bulge is the word, spread, as if a big hand spread out on top and pushed downward. The whole thing started to crack and crackle and something came loose and whistled through the air between us, and if you think we were terminally bushed—we did—we got terminally panicked. We must've scampered a hundred meters away with that noise behind us, pressure tanks banging and hissing and roaring, twisting metal crackling and screeching, and—and—"

The blue man waited. "And laughing," Case whispered. He drew a deep breath and continued.

“When it was over ... we thought it would never be over, we lay in a swag in the sand and watched our boat chewing itself up and the ground swallowing, it seemed to go on for hours ... when it was over there was nothing but some tumbled sand, a great cloud of dust, and the two coffins and the junk we had thrown out earlier, lying there, some of it half-buried in sand and dust. We looked at each other and we were in almost as bad shape as the boat, only we weren’t buried yet. My hands were burned and one fingernail was torn half off, and the scrapes I got in the crash were all open and bleeding, and Jan was bruised and had a cut on her head and we were both covered with mudsweat and blood.

“We helped each other down to the lake and washed. We were too hurt and tired to think; maybe that’s what shock really is, because if we could have thought it all out then I think we would’ve just lain down and died. We didn’t know where we were, we didn’t know what had happened or what was happening or what would (except that whatever it might be, it didn’t have much hope in it for us.)”

Case sighed and placed his hands on the broad arms of his chair. Before he could rise, the blue man swiftly and considerately touched (in that untouching way of his) something on his panel, and decking appeared in the chamber. Either it was made or it was there all the time and only now became opaque. Case didn’t know, but it was something to stand on and “Uh!” His knees sagged and he caught at the chair arm. “It’s all right,” he told the watchful Doctor. He pressed himself upright; stood, walked a pace, turned and stood by the chair, feeling the newness of movement, its old, somatically forgotten familiarity. “This is one G?”

“Not quite,” said the Doctor.

“Try it.”

The blue man ran a hand partway around the edge of a disk, which increased its glow. The transition from one gravitic state to another is a strange thing indeed, for everything responds. The brain pressures the skull as the feet press the floor; skin high on the chest stretches, low on the belly becomes less taut; the cheeks, the hair, the masses of liver and gut proclaim themselves. When Case began to tremble he sat down again. “I guess it’ll be a while.” he said shakily.

“It will.”

“But I’ll make it.”

“I’d say so. You seem to have a special talent for that.”

Case said thoughtfully, “Maybe I do. But then, I had Jan.”

(“I had Jan.” Strong Jan, wise Jan, tender Jan.) Jan kept herself to herself, mostly, and took orders—not because she was a woman, because the Space Services in general and X_n in particular made no distinctions; actually there were more female officers than men; Jan took orders because she was a rating and he was an officer ... to begin with ... and after that her reasons were her own. Perhaps she was one of those who would always defer to a decision-maker, which Case was, through and through. And perhaps she had other reasons. She knew her specialty and all its peripherals. A good biologist (and she was good or she wouldn’t have been with X_n) is a physicist and a chemist, a physiologist and a cytologist, a geneticist and a zoologist. Her way was to remain alert to whatever Case was doing; to make herself available in every possible way, and to keep her id, ego, self, whatever that inner “who-I-really-am” thing is—to herself. It was Jan who reasoned that some of the food they gathered might serve them better, and cause less diarrhea and stomachache, if it were processed, and that an application of heat might suffice in lieu of something more sophisticated. It was she who took fire from the burning forest and preserved it, and experimented with the bivalves and fruits and later the fish they were able to catch (it was she who reinvented the gorge: the fish-hook concept escaped her). Case and Jan came from generations of people who lived in a world without primitives, in which the art and practice of living off the land were academicians’ mysteries.

It took them forty-three days to discover a solid-seeming outcropping with the right slant, to get the coffins—lifebelts—up to it and bedded there, ready for use. They got them across the sand and into the water, lever and haul, roll, lift and tug, and floated them up to the closest possible point to the rocks, where they did the hardest work—manhandling them upslope to their appointed cradles and setting them in. They lay close to one another, almost exactly parallel and angled to the sky, and it was after exhaustive checks and rechecks of everything that Case bound the launching systems of both to the controls of one. Their drill took into account a number of possibilities: if there were one

survivor, he or she would take Number Three, which contained the master firing key. If one were incapacitated, the other would load him or her into the “slave” and board the “master.” If both were ambulant, Case would take the “master,” Three. Case gave the two tiny craft meticulous checks on a regular schedule, and (sometimes by a huge effort of will) they touched not one crumb, not one drop, from the stores aboard the tiny craft.

They permitted themselves no fixed idea as to why they prepared this rather hopeless escape. The coupled launching, of course, would give them a fair chance of staying together in the gulfs of space. What would make them launch would be to get away from something or to get to something; and it was always possible that they would never launch at all: but “Better to have ’em and not need ’em,” Case said; “than to need ’em and not have ’em.”

They made memories ... which, after all, is the only meaningful thing any conscious entity can do. Many were not to be shared.

Under the blanket she had improvised from some headlining: “Case, what are you doing?”

“Self-relief. Acceptable alternative to the tingler, according to the manual.”

“Oh. ‘Furtherance of psycho-physiological equilibrium’ under Health, individual, under conditions, emergency.”

“Right. Section—”

“I recall the reference,” she said: one of the few times she had ever interrupted him. “This isn’t an emergency, Case.”

He put his nose out into the chill night air and looked up at the black starless sky. “It isn’t?”

“Not that kind of an emergency.”

“We’ve lost our tingler.”

“So we have.”

“Oh, I see. You are prepared to take care of this for me.” She said, “Well prepared.”

“I had thought of that,” Case said seriously. “However, it has been a principle with me not to extend my authority into the personal area. That is a presumption.”

“It isn’t a presumption,” she said flatly. “Women, too, need means for the furtherance of psycho-physiological equilibrium.”

“They do?” It wasn’t a denial; he had simply never thought about it. Now that he did, he realized with a flash that it must be

so. "How very efficient."

"Isn't it." Then she enveloped him wildly. He was shaken. He knew why she cried out (he was not completely ignorant) but not why she cried. It was as good as any tingler, and he could see that in time it might even be better.

And they built a shelter. The first time it rained at night was, in its way, the worst thing that had happened to them. The crash, their injuries, cut feet, thorn-gouged bodies, even hunger—none of these contained the special misery of being wet and cold in the dark with nowhere to go until the sun came up. They clung together under the permeable head-liner wet as worms, and the moment it grew light they began to build. They found a rock outcrop near the edge of the beach, with two large, many-branched trees near it, and by laying poles from the top of the rock to the tree-crotches, they had roof-beams. The poles were a special treasure; they found them in the burned part of the forest where trees had fallen.

Nowhere else on the planet did they see fallen trees.

They found vines to lace between and over the poles and down the sides, where the ends could be staked into the ground, and another kind of vine, thick and tough, to weave through these horizontally, to carry the thatch of the roof and sidewalls. Thatch (which, like the gorge, was Jan's invention) was practical because of the sheltered location, and because there were no insects. The now-ragged piece of headliner served for end wall and door, and

—and they were happy there.

No literature has truly defined "happy"; its special quality is that its nature is seldom grasped at the time it happens, but only afterward.

Case had a long, long afterward.

"We quarreled once," Case said after a time. "I think that's where it began, the—the nightmare.

"Her voicewriter. I'd been up the beach at the fish-trap. There was an inlet there and we'd set stones in the form of a V with the point shoreward and just a little opening at the point. Fish would swim in through the opening and once inside they couldn't find the hole. After a time it was full of fish. The big ones ate the little ones and that kept them going without any help from us. Most of

the time you could stand on dry ground and spear one, first time out. I came back with a fine one, a meaty fish with a triangular head and no scales, and you know, when you expect someone to be glad and they ...”

(She flew at him; he had to drop the fish and take her upper arms and hold her and even shake her a little before he could understand what she was screaming at him.)

“It was the voicewriter. It was one of the few things she had been able to save from the cabin of the lifeboat, and she used it every day. It was a private thing with her, and I sensed this and never questioned it and never played it back. I assumed she was keeping a log, and let it go at that. And it was gone, and never before or afterward did I see her so angry.

“It took hours for me to convince her that I had not taken it, that she must have mislaid it somewhere. She was faced with an impossibility; I would not lie to her, or at least, I never had; and she was sure she had not lost the writer. She receded finally into a mood of doubt which lasted until ... until ... for the rest of the time.

“And a while later I had a chance to understand a little better how she felt. I had an array of stone tools—spearpoints and cutting blades and fish-scrapers—that had cost me I don’t know how many hours of effort and care, and we had come to depend on them. There was a shelf in the rock which formed the back wall of our house, and I had them neatly laid out by size and function; I worked on them every minute I wasn’t doing something else. Perhaps you can imagine my feelings when I returned to the house to get a cutting tool and found them gone—all of them. Jan was gathering fruits in the forest and when she came back I was waiting for her—furious. I suppose what happened between us would have been amusing to an outsider, how I yelled, how she denied, how I doubted someone who had never lied before ... what stopped us from the angry accusations was ... was that someone—something—did think it was funny. We heard laughter.

“That stopped the fight—right then. For a moment we held on to each other, not breathing, listening. I thought at first it was coming from inside my head, so sourceless was it. But then I knew Jan heard it too—not loud, pervading everything.

“That same night we awoke to something else—a smell. Doctor,

no chemical laboratory in history has ever produced a more powerful, disgusting smell than that. It was the essence of rot and filth and sickness; it brought us up standing, gasping for breath. We ran outside, and then across the beach and into the water. The smell was everywhere. Jan vomited.

“And then it was gone, in less than an hour—just gone, without a trace. Jan said she heard the laughter again.

“The next day we took some fruit—we had no way of carrying water—in a basket Jan had woven, and went inland, to climb a high point we could use to scan the territory. We had explored it before, and it gave a wide view. If there was anything or anyone new on the planetoid with us, we wanted to know what it was.

“It was a long, hard climb—it would have been impossible for us the year before, but our feet were tough and our skins well used to heat and wind and thorns; if it had not been for the growing fear, it would have been a pleasant adventure.

“All the effort got us, besides the exhaustion, was another session with the smell, and more laughter.

“It got cold. For two days and a night the lake and the little water we had was frozen solid. Our only covering was the headliner, and we rolled up in that and lay shivering. At the twentieth hour we had to get up to relieve our bladders—did you know you can be dying of thirst and still have to relieve your bladder?—and though we were gone for only a minute or so, and moved only a few meters from the shelter, when we got back the liner was gone.

“We almost died. We would have died, I think, but just before dark it got warm again. Melted frost was dripping all around us; we drank it and had something to eat. We slept like dead people.

“In the morning the lake was gone—a lake so big, that part of it, you couldn’t see the other side. I looked at Jan and I’ll never forget the way she stared at it, eyes wide open and kind of ... dry, and she didn’t start and she didn’t cry out; she just said in a very low voice, ‘Case, I can’t stand any more.’ Jan could stand anything, that’s what I thought.

She told me some things. She said that the forest was impossible—no humus, no windfalls. She said that fruit trees just don’t bear all the time without blooming and growing the fruit in cycles, without some means of pollinating ... a whole lot of technical stuff. She said the same thing about the bivalves and the

fish; there seemed to be no aquatic vegetation, no plankton or equivalent—no reason for the fish to have evolved. I remember the smell came up as she was talking, as she was saying, ‘Something here wanted us, made this place for us. Now it doesn’t want us any more.’

“I said, ‘Would we be better off in space, in the coffins?’ She said yes. I said, ‘We wouldn’t be together.’ She looked at me for a long time. She had eyes you couldn’t see into. I couldn’t see anything. She said, ‘We’ll leave together and we’ll be picked up together or we’ll die. At least this ends through our choice, and not at the command of some—some awful—’ and the smell peaked up and she vomited.

“I said all right, we’ll go.

“We went down to the beach, only now it was a sandy shelf at the edge of huge rocky barrens where the lake had been. We heard the laughing again, loud. We struck up the beach toward the coffins. There was a terrible rumbling behind us and the beach fell away into a rocky pit fifty to a hundred meters deep, the sand blowing about like snow. We began to run, and another section of beach fell.

“That really terrified Jan and I had to sprint all out to catch up with her. I grabbed her and held her until she stopped struggling. More beach fell, some of it not a meter from our feet, but I wouldn’t budge. She finally quieted.

“I said, ‘I think you’re right. If whatever-it-is wants us to go, we’ll go. If it wants us to go, it will leave the lifeboats alone until we get there. If it wanted to kill us we’d be dead by now.’

“She said, ‘All right, then, but *hurry!*’ and I said, ‘No, Jan—I’ll go, but I won’t run.’

“She looked at me—really looked at me, not as some force holding her while she struggled to run, not glancing over my shoulder at the edges of that new hole in the ground—really at me, and she smiled. Smiled. She said, ‘All right, Case,’ and took my hand.

“Suddenly the air was sweet and the ground no longer shook, and we walked up the beach looking at each other and not at the place where the lake used to be, or back where our house was, or anything. When we got to the little launch-pad I had built, I started a careful preflight check. I checked everything, Doctor—everything. I took my time and Jan gave me readouts, one craft

to the other, when I asked for them. All that while the whole planetoid was still, like waiting, like watching. And whatever it was, it was no longer laughing.

“Jan got in and lay down. She put out her arms and kissed me in a way—”

(—in a way she never had before, not even lying together. She ... never had kissed him before, not really, only sometimes when in the midst of her own storm she seemed to forget some subtle resolution of her own....)

“... in a way that was all the words anyone needed, and then I closed the plate, and saw the dogs turn tight from the inside. Then I got into my own craft and buttoned up and punched the Go button.”

Case meant to say, “And she didn’t launch,” but his voice wouldn’t work and he whispered, “And she didn’t launch. She didn’t launch.” He meant to look up at the Doctor but his eyes didn’t seem to work either. He dashed a hand angrily across them. “You see,” he said harshly, “I—”

“I see,” said the blue man gently. Something seemed to have rushed out of Case; he was slumped in his chair and his hands flattened out on the arms as if they had weight on them. The Doctor turned to see the telltales and said, “I think you need to sleep for a while, Case.”

Case moved his head slightly but did not answer otherwise. The blue man waved at a disk on his board and the chair became a couch, the lights dimmed, the Doctor faded away.

Case’s resuscitation had not ceased with the withdrawal of the tubes from his arms. Asleep and awake, he had been bathed in emanations and vibrations, tiny search beams and organic detectors. The bland mixture in the sucker was computer-formularized just for him, here, now, in this up-to-the-second condition; so that when he next awoke it was in his usual style, alertly and all together. He rose and stretched, taking pleasure in the knotting and flexing of his muscles. He tried a step, then another, then turned to face the bank of telltales. Clear and open and fully, he could read them all—even the many which did not exist even in theory when he was born. He smiled when he saw that the gravity was 1.2 Earth normal. In space, a third of that was usual, but Case smiled and left it where it was. He looked

over the huge bank of controls, and found them completely understandable, while marveling at their completeness.

He walked back to the oval doorway through which his coffin had been transported, and went down the corridor. He could read the never-before-seen legends on the doors: ARMAMENT, DRIVE, ELEMENT BANK, BIOLOGY, CHEMISTRY (he knew without looking that these were interconnected), GENERAL REPAIR AND TOOLS ... on and on to the end of the corridor and around two corners and forward again on the other side of the ship: ATMOSPHERE AND PRESSURE, COMMUNICATIONS, COMPUTER RECREATION AND EXERCISE, on and on again, until at last he faced the door marked MASTER CONTROL. It dilated for him with a snap as he approached it, and he entered.

The control room was sizable, and again he found himself perfectly familiar with equipment he had never seen before. By the main control bank and its three chairs stood the blue man. There had been no one else anywhere on board, "And you're a hologram," said Case, completing his thought aloud.

The blue man inclined his head. "There has not been a man aboard this ship in over seven hundred years. It's too far away, and anyway ... nobody cares. Correction. A great many people care, are interested, even fascinated. But the urge to come out, to be personally involved—it seems to have left us. You know what Earth is like now."

It was not a question. Case called upon the knowledge which had been fed into his brain in just the way you can call upon the likeness of your first teacher's face, your first fist-fight, the time she ... or he came to you and said ... You see? These things are with you always, but are not evident until you call.

So Case looked on Earth as a contemporary, ten centuries past his death, and wagged his head slowly. "It shouldn't have come to this."

"It had to. It was that or die," said the blue man; and Case thought a bit and saw that it was so.

"You can go back, Case. You can be suspended rather more efficiently than you were before, and for a good while longer. It would take—oh—another fifteen hundred years to get you there, and it is not possible to predict what Earth would be like when you got there. Still, it would be Earth—it would be ... home."

"'You can't go home again,'" Case quoted from somewhere, with not a little bitterness. "I suppose there's an alternative."

"There is, and it is a matter of your free choice. You see, Case, primitive as you may seem to some of us, you have a quality which we lack and admire—a willingness to go out, to do, to explore and discover and find, actually and physically, and not in theory or extrapolation or imagination. This ship was designed, yes, and used, by men like you, and when the last of them died on an exploration, there were no replacements, and besides, the ship was already so far away that only long-suspended men could reach it.

"The ship itself is self-supporting, and not only has a superb computer system, but is tied to all the computers of the Terran Group. We have what might be called a standing-wave situation, constantly locked on to this ship. Through it we can transmit nothing but information—but we can give you any amount of that. From it, we will have an opportunity to experience with you the places you go, the things you see and learn and experience."

"You are giving me this ship? To take where?"

The blue, shimmering figure spread its arms. "Anywhere."

"But you watch everything I do."

"If you're willing."

"I'm not willing. I need some sort of privacy—including inside of my head."

"That is a sacred matter with us. We will not intrude, and if you like we will give you a zone of privacy anywhere you like in the ship."

"How about this: instead of any special place, we make it anywhere I am—any time I say so?"

"You would not deny us the—"

"No, no, no," Case said impatiently; "I am conditioned to keep a bargain once it's struck. You're giving me this ship and a free hand, and you want something in exchange. I'll see that you get it, and I won't short-change you."

"Very well," said the blue man. "You have already been thoroughly briefed on the ship's operation and on those things which are of particular interest to the public at large and to specialists. You have at your command the memory banks of this computer and all others tied to it. Case Hardin—the ship is yours."

This seemed devastatingly abrupt, but there seemed nothing else to say except "Thanks," which he did.

"If this means of communication suits you," said the blue man, "call me, and I'll manifest this way immediately. There are quite a few other means; ask the computer. Good luck, and thank you." And he faded, and was gone.

Case stood looking for a long time at the place where the blue man had been, shook his head, grinned briefly, and went to the central command chair.

He sat down. "Computer," he said, "your name's Buzzbox."

"Yes, Commander."

"Case."

"Yes, Case."

"Now, here's what I want you to do...."

Case came in low over the beach, low and slowly. His ship was in orbit and he flew a small and highly sophisticated boat; capable beyond anything a man of his time could have dreamt of. In the small pocket adhering to his chest (like a graft; only he could will it loose) was a compact device which would command both vessels and all communications. His computer had made short work of locating this sector of space, working with the trajectory he followed when he was picked up, and feeding in an immense amount of observation on anything and everything which might have diverted the coffin during those dead years.

"You haven't changed things much," he muttered, to the planetoid or to whatever lived there. The beach had a lake again; the sand was scuffled in familiar places, and a patch was worn to the edge of the woods where their house had been.

Was. Right now.

He drifted to it and dropped the ramp. Yes, the thatched house with the ragged piece of head-lining fluttering in the light breeze, and inside the familiar dried clay plates and even the withered remnants of fruit she had ... own hands ... looking up at ... Jan ... Jan. And his spearpoints and scrapers, oh and her voicewriter.

He took them.

Back in his boat, heart almost stopped, breath held, he tooled up to the spot where the coffins had been. Gone. Both gone.

He landed again and walked slowly up to the rocks. Here she had stood, calling out readings as he checked, with the sweet air full of dust from the fallen lakeshore. Here he had bent over the

open coffin and she had kissed him, kissed him in a way that ...

There were the burn marks: his launch. Where hers had been—no marks at all. If she hadn't launched, yet was not here ...

Oh but it's a thousand years, man!

He thought he heard a sound (laughter) and from the corner of his eye some sort of movement, high up, distant.

Only a bird.

Bird! The one thing they never saw on this planetoid—a bird.

He turned to watch it. It was fifty meters high over the forest, coming straight for him in a flat glide. He waited grimly for it. He looked like a naked man with something attached to his chest. He was a great deal more than that.

The bird was not a bird, but a clownlike creature with wide, intelligent eyes that seemed to be either biped or quadruped. Its wings were batlike, but rolled and folded until they were quite presentable arms. It landed and waddled fearlessly up to Case and stared at him.

Case stared back, and did not move until the thing—*laughed*.

It was, full and true, the laughter that had haunted them, driven them, when they dwelt here, and Case's new status and powers could not protect him from the wave of terror and fury that swept through him. He found himself by his boat at a bound, backing up the ramp, slit-eyed, gasping. He would blast this thing into a powder. He'd crack this whole evil planet like an egg. He'd

The laughing thing waddled up to him on three legs, holding something dangling from its finger-claws on the fourth.

Jan's brassard?

He took it gingerly and spread it out. Jan's brassard. He made an animal cry and leaped for the clown-creature, but it skipped back out of the way. It stood there grinning at him, and, in a most humanlike way, waving him on.

Slowly he followed it.

It led him inland, making no particular effort to stay out of his reach—knowing, he realized, that he would not harm it as long as it might lead him to Jan's body. He wondered if it knew the boat was protecting him, could drop a shield over him in a twentieth of a second, scorch the ground around him for thirty meters, could flash to his side in a blink (for its drive was inertia-less), could even follow and find an escaping attacker, earth, sea, or

sky.

But he played it the clown's way, toiling through the sand and rocks and into the forest, where in a small clearing, the clown-creature, grinning, began to dig.

Case watched it until it stopped and looked up, grinning its stupid grin (under those bright eyes), and motioned for him to help.

And he did, with his bare hands, shoulder to shoulder with this improbable creature, until curved white metal showed in the earth.

And then he dug! There was, somehow, a glory in the pain of broken nails and aching muscles and rasping, labored breathing. Slowly the length of the coffin saw the light, and they freed it. Side by side they got fingers under one end, and heaved. Case didn't care what he put into it; the strength of the clown-creature was astonishing. Up it came, with Case dusting earth from its flanks and crying, crying like a child.

He fingered the control and his boat lanced in through the trees and settled to the forest floor. The ramp dropped and two small winchers, like drifting saucers, appeared and flew to the end of the coffin. The clown-thing made as if to help manhandle the coffin up the ramp, but Case waved it back. The winch-plates lifted the coffin, turned it, and carried it through the air, up the ramp and into the boat.

Case leaped up the ramp and turned at the top. "Thanks a heap hell of a lot, friend, whoever you are, and good-bye."

The clown-creature also leaped up the ramp and looked pleadingly at Case, its head on one side.

"Look, I'm grateful and all that, but I've got to go. And to tell you the truth, I want no part of this place or anything that belongs to it. Now beat it." He made a go-away gesture, but the thing just stood there pleading, so he gave it a push and it toppled off the ramp, half unfolding its strange wings to keep its balance.

Case went inside as the ramp raised. The clown-thing laughed once, dwindled to a black shiny button, and bounced up the moving ramp and into the boat just before the ramp closed.

Case settled at the controls. Behind him was the curved cabin bench, padded in glossy black material which was held in place by a series of shiny black buttons. Unseen by Case, a shiny black

button bounced up on the bench, up on the backrest, and became a button exactly in line with all the others.

After watching the Doctor for an interminable time, Case left him to his work and went to his quarters, wondering if he should have himself knocked out for a dozen hours, knowing he could not, not until he knew ... The Doctor had said only, "It's been a terrible time, a terrible long time ..." and had not wanted Case to look at her. He had said a strange thing: "*She* wouldn't want you to look at her," and Case had said why not, and the Doctor had said, "Because she's a woman."

Everybody seemed to know something about women that Case did not.

He thumped down in his quarters and looked around him. Jan ... try not to think of Jan, with the Jan-ness of her permeating the ship. Try not to think of her, with the spearpoints and the voicewriter lying there on the ...

He picked up the voicewriter, "*Shining in the light ...*" Her voice, a half-whisper. He set it back a bit, and played: "*... if only he could be outside of himself, see himself shining in the light with the water splashing into pearls and his teeth shining too as he laughs ... why can't he ever laugh with me? What makes him so grave and careful? How could he know so little about a woman?*"

Some of it was scientific data and observation, but again that hushed, hungry voice, "*I'll never give in, never, never, I'll never let him know; but why can't he see it, why can't he say it just once?*"

Say what? thought Case.

He kept on listening to the voicewriter until he found out.

"Case."

"Yea, Buzzbox."

"He beat me, and I love him."

"What are you talking about?"

"The Dreamer. He loves me too. Hey thanks, Case."

"Repeat, from your call."

"Case."

"Yeah, Buzzbox."

"He beat me, and I love him."

"Hold it right there. Who beat you?"

"The Dreamer. At chess."

"Somebody beat *you* at chess?"

"Twenty-three moves. A queen's bishop's pawn opening, and then—"

"Never mind the blow-by-blow, Buzzbox. Where is this who-did-you-say?"

"Dreamer. In my house."

Case slammed out of his quarters and down to the door marked "computer." There before the twinkling wall which was the heart of Buzzbox sat a small table. On the table was a chessboard. On the chessboard was the sparse remnant of a very bloody chess game, with the black king turned down in defeat. Before the table was a stool, and on the stool squatted the clown-creature, looking up at him with its brilliant eyes, and laughing.

"*How the hell did you get there?*"

"You brought him up in the boat. I guess I love you too, Case," said Buzzbox.

"If I did I wasn't aware of it."

"I know you weren't, but you brought him anyway. And he loves me. And he's going to stay with us."

The clown-thing nodded vigorously.

"The hell he is. He goes right back to that crazy planetoid."

"He can't go back to it," said Buzzbox. "He *is* the planetoid. He lives next to another space. You don't understand that. Well, I do, he explained it to me. He can be anything he wants. He can be big as a pin or a molecule or a whole planet. He can squirt any part of himself from one space to another, like a half-filled balloon through a hole in a board. And he dreams things up; that's why I call him the Dreamer."

The Dreamer laughed and suddenly was a cut-crystal vase, and was a pale lavender centipede, and was a clown-creature again, laughing.

"He gets off this ship."

"Then so do I. Case, he *loves* me, can't you understand that?"

The clown-creature nodded vigorously. Case glared at it. "What the hell do you know about love, Buzzbox?"

"The Dreamer explained it to me. He learned it from a voicewriter. This girl was loving *you*. What the hell do you know about love, Case?"

Case felt a moment of disorientation, utter disbelief. Computers

do not take this tone with the master. "What's gotten into you, Buzzbox?"

"I'm in love, I'm in love, and he loves me!"

And that's what love does, thought Case. Frees the slaves. Damns the consequences.

"And what happens if I kick this—this batwinged ape off my ship?"

"Then you're on your own, Master. You'll never get another buzz from me."

"Do you know what this goggle-eyed monstrosity has put me through?"

"He saved you."

Case glowered at the Dreamer, who smiled back at him cheerfully. And then he thought about the lifeboat, and the strange planet that swam up out of nowhere, and the way those nines appeared on his Terra Normal readout—not instantaneously, as it would in any normal demand, but bit by bit, as the planetoid ... the Dreamer ... sensed what was needed and supplied it. And their year there, while the Dreamer watched ... (How lonely must a creature like that be?) ... and learned. Then—the voicewriter; something new; the day-by-day account of a proud woman's falling in love and loving ... loving a grim, serious, unleavened ... innocent ... idiot like him. What the hell do you know about love, Case?... *"Why can't he say it? Why can't he say it just once?"* ... and the cold, the disappearing lake ... that was to drive him away—him, not them.

"Why did he drive me away, and keep her?"

"He thought she might love him," said the Buzzbox.

"*Him!*" Case gaped at the ludicrous little clown, who nodded, shimmered, and stood before him as a muscular blond Adonis; shimmered and appeared as a stately bearded monarch in a jewel-encrusted robe; shimmered and appeared as the ludicrous winged ape.

"She didn't want to love anybody but you, Case. But he had to find out."

"If it killed me," said Case.

"It didn't, did it," said the computer reasonably.

"And if I let this ... this silly-looking nightmare ship with me, how do I know he won't pull another caper like that?"

"Because he loves me, and I can't hurt you."

It occurred to Case that the computer and the alien were being very kind to him in being persuasive—when he really had no choice. The powers possessed by the computer alone were awesome. Combine them with those of a tachyonic, trans-spatial entity like this, and the mind began to bend. “Well,” he said, “we’ll see....”

He went forward to the hospital. The blue man made no effort to stop him as he hesitated on the threshold, so he went in. Together they looked at the naked sleeping woman afloat in the glow of the beams. She was full-fleshed again and her scars were gone. Her hair was loose. He had never seen anything more beautiful in his life. “She—”

“She will wake in a moment,” said the Doctor. “Perhaps you’d better speak to her when she does.”

When she opened her eyes, it was Case she saw first. “Case ...”

He spoke to her. He knew what to say, now.

Somewhere he heard laughter. He didn’t mind any more.

Agnes, Accent and Access

In the summer of 1978 a wind blew slantwise through the offices of M&H. The phrase was Mr. Miroshi's for he had a touch of poetry about him. What he meant by it was the mildly bizarre, perplexing, and completely unpredictable behavior of the information retrieval sequences. In the course of an ordinary business day one might hardly think it crucial if the computer delivered to the Math section, for example, a medical paper complete with unsettling illustrations, or if Marketing, wanting a survey of New Zealand imports, received instead a treatise on human hostility and aggression. But M&H was no ordinary business, so they called in Merrihew.

Merrihew was no ordinary trouble-shooter, either.

Mr. Handel, co-president of M&H, explained to Merrihew about M&H, once they were settled in their booth in a cafe not far from the M&H headquarters. (Merrihew's suggestion, of course; he was not given to charging into situations he did not comprehend.)

"No ordinary business, Mr. Merrihew. We are not a large firm, really. But then Maserati isn't a large firm either, and no one yet produces Yomeimon Gates on a production line. Our methods are, I would say, unusual. I would not," he added modestly, "say unique."

"Your advertising says that for you."

"Ah, then you do know something about us."

Merrihew, whose reputation was that of knowing something about everything, gestured for Mr. Handel to continue. He did: "We are highly diversified and we buy, sell, trade, manufacture, contract, subcontract, and produce a great many things in many different ways and places. It is safe to say that each of our activities is successful to a degree—varying, of course—"

"From excellent all the way down to good."

"You are kind, Mr. Merrihew."

"You are successful, that's all."

"Ah." Mr. Handel was pleased. "You do make it difficult to be modest."

"It is only difficult to be modest when it's painful, Mr. Handel, and it's only painful when it's necessary. Please go on."

Mr. Handel raised his eyebrows at this piece of pragmatic philosophy and went on: "Well then, it's no secret that our basic product is office equipment and that our products and services are means to promote that equipment. We try to integrate our approaches completely. That is, the problem dictates its solution, the chosen method of operation is what designs a machine or a component. If you came to us asking if one of our systems would sell oranges, say, or move merchandise or establish a Matto Grosso market or test consumer response equally well in Prague as in Bangkok, why, we would devise the best possible approach to the problem and take that one step further—the one that makes us, if I may say so at last, unique. We actually enter the field. We take the risks, we do the work, we find out if the approach is optimum. And if there seems to be a better way we try that too. When that happens, it is frequently the case that a new office machine or method is called for, which is why we say that 'your problems design our equipment.' "

"And how do your customers—prospects—feel about your incursions into their fields? Especially the successful ones?"

"Mr. Merrihew," said Mr. Handel, as if explaining not the phenomena, but the very fact of day-and-night, "they know we will withdraw."

Merrihew lifted one eyebrow—somehow a much more potent gesture than the elevation of Mr. Handel's two. "Don't you sometimes find it a little tempting to stay with a nice new fruitful operation?"

"One need not yield to temptation," Mr. Handel said primly. "Our central concern is office systems—and we try hard not to forget it."

"Then you can't lose."

"As long as everything works as it is designed to work."

"Ah," said Merrihew. "Now we come to the problem."

"Now we come to the problem. For you can see how essential, how absolutely vital, in a small but highly diversified operation such as ours, is the matter of retrieval—immediate, reliable retrieval of the information stored in our banks and available from outside. For not only do our operations depend on retrieval,

but each operation, each sequence in each operation, is a demonstration of our systems and is on display. I have my own special nightmare, Mr. Merrihew,” said Mr. Handel, running a controlled finger around the back and side of his collar—a small movement, but in this bright, intense little man, a signal of submerged fatigue and terrible tension. “I have this nightmare in which some Very Important Person stands behind Mr. Samm of our Math division and witnesses Samm’s request for a certain set of figures—and there is a click from the console and from the slot comes something like this—” From the capacious attaché case beside him on the seat he drew a sheaf of papers and slid them across to Merrihew. A typical M&H duplication, with crisp typography and in vivid colors, it was an excessively specific illustrated article entitled “Alternatives to the Posterior Colpotomy.” Under it was another called “Management of Abscesses of the Lower Mandibular Arch.” There was more, and worse. Merrihew lifted the stack, banged the edge of it against the table to align the papers and carefully turned the whole thing face down. His eye fell on his half-empty coffee cup and with an infinitely eloquent gesture he pushed it away from him.

“The nightmare,” said Mr. Handel hoarsely, “actually came two-thirds true. The only important element missing was the Very Important Person.” He informed a discreet shudder and then displayed another many-leaved paper. “‘Hostility and Aggression, A Radical Approach,’ ” he read. “This arrived on the desk of our marketing director in response to a request for trade information on the South Island of New Zealand. These, of course, are gross examples. In a way I’m far more worried about the little ones. You can see the big ones. I don’t have to describe to you the possibilities of one misplaced decimal point, or the inaccurate reporting of a single raw-material supply in some of the more complex projections we get into.”

“I get the picture. Now, how often is this happening?”

“That,” said Mr. Handel, “is the most troublesome thing of all. I have here a chart of the incidence of these, ah, events—dates, times, locations of demand and points of retrieval—and as much as one can express as to the nature of the, ah, irregularities, and as you can see at a glance, they are about as nearly random as such things could possibly be—in frequency, quality, kind, importance and every other factor.”

"And your circuitry-tapes, disks, all that?"

Another thick sheaf joined the growing mound on the table. "That's one area we can practically eliminate," Mr. Handel said with confidence and more than a little pride, "These are M&H installations, naturally, in an M&H environment and maintained and inspected by M&H personnel. We are on display at all times, Mr. Merrihew, through and through. Our weekly maintenance is more thorough than you'd find elsewhere twice a year and our engineers know their jobs. As for the computers and their satellites, most are self-checking and run their own diagnostics periodically. No, Mr. Merrihew, we won't find the trouble there."

"I think you're right. We won't," said Merrihew, with a positiveness that apparently startled the co-president.

"You sound, suddenly, as if you had solved the problem."

"Oh, I have," said Merrihew. He reached for the chart of events and glanced at it again. "It's just that knowing what's wrong isn't enough. I want to know *why*."

"I—don't quite follow you, Mr. Merrihew."

"I know that, Mr. Handel. Now, here's what I want you to do. When I come to see you tomorrow morning, don't let me."

"I—beg your pardon?"

"Don't get rid of me either. Just stall. All right?"

"Mr. Merrihew, would you mind telling me—"

"I'd mind a lot. Now I have to go think. See you tomorrow, Mr. Handel." He rose and slid out of the booth and added the word: "Ultimately." He left.

Mr. Handel sat where he was, motionless and speechless and for a long moment without even thought, until at length he stirred, picked up his documents—and, of course, the check—and went back to the office.

Suave was the word: the room was suave. The lighting was gentle and varied, tasteful and flattering. Sound went where one desired it to go and was swallowed up everywhere else. There was a sense of pleasant disorientation, for the walls, and to a very subtle degree the floor, were not perfectly flat and there was no special place or line where wall became ceiling. In a strange way one seemed not to be indoors at all as much as in another country. Most of the light in the room changed color, but only slightly and with the wonderful gradualness of an aurora, for one

does not see the change; one must look away and look back again to be able to know it at all. Yet the light was steady and clear where it should be so—around the wide soft benches and their displays of literature (current magazines, “coffee-table” art books and, nowhere in sight but by no means out of reach, discreetly startling M&H promotions) and equally steady and warm near the two mirrors. Clever touch, that, thought Merrihew.

But no one, on entering the reception room at M&H, could count the instruments of this symphony of subtleties, most especially when Miss Kuhli was at her console.

Miss Kuhli (Merrihew had heard it “Cooley” the day before, and had built quite a different picture) was Eurasian. Not since the perfection of ferro-concrete and its self-stressed freedom has architecture been able to match the construction of such eyelids and supraorbital arches as those with which Miss Kuhli had been born. Her hands seemed to be the cooperative work of a florist and a choreographer. Her body had not been designed, but inspired, and her hair was such that it could not be believed at a single glance. She dressed with the studied spontaneity of the highest possible high fashion, of which Merrihew had once cynically remarked, *If the eardrum ever becomes taboo, high fashion will find a way to give you a glimpse of it.* All of which was quite secondary to Miss Kuhli’s voice. Correction. It wasn’t solely the voice. It was the instrument and the skill, the genius with which it was played. “Good morning,” she said as Merrihew entered, and he all but responded, *Thank you—oh, thank you*—just because she cared to give him all her attention, all her time while she was saying it.

“Good morning.”

“Is there anything I can do for you?” she asked with tastefully controlled eagerness.

Offhand, Merrihew could think of twelve ways to answer that question and was strongly inclined to use all of them. But he said, “I’d like to see Mr. Handel.”

Her eyes flicked swiftly to what could only have been an appointment list; but the way she did it could be translated by any wishful visitor as—just possibly—a wink. “I’ll see if he’s in yet. Your name is—”

“Merrihew.”

“Mr. Merrihew!” she said through a warm quick smile. One

would think she had been waiting for months for this meeting. “Lois,” she said to the holoscreen on her console. “Is Mr. Handel there yet? Mr. Merrihew’s here.” The way she spoke it Merrihew’s name was in a slightly larger type than the rest of the sentence—but discreetly not italicized. The punctuation at the end was something more emphatic than a period but nothing as gross as an exclamation point.

The screen asked if Mr. Merrihew could wait. Merrihew could. He squinted against the flashbulb radiance of Miss Kuhli’s smile and went to one of the benches (if it was a bench) against the wall (if it was a wall) where he might best watch the action.

And action there was. Miss Kuhli’s console (on which was affixed a polite but monumentally expensive small bronze plate, in lowercase italics: *agnes kuhli*) was so placed that it was not a barrier between herself and the world. At the same time it was not exactly included in the waiting room. One might call it half-surround, a construct of such a nature that it was a convenience for her to occupy it, while clearly the lesser of comforts to anyone else. Seated, she was not concealed, and to a degree shared the space as one might share a living room. Yet her operating point was hers and no one else’s.

People came. People went. People waited. Merrihew very soon observed, with a small cynical slap on his own wrist, that Miss Kuhli’s eager recognition of strangers and her warm willingness to help had not been for him alone. She surely was among the best in the world at what she did, and this special thing she did better than anyone he had ever seen. But he did indulge himself in a childish moment of regret ...

She was never hurried and never at a loss. It took some time for the casual observer (which Merrihew certainly was not) to realize that reception was a very small part of what she did. Her console was constantly active—soft lights and whispers, little flashings and murmurings, to each of which she responded according to its demand. At times she seemed to sink into a species of meditation—hands clasped on her knee, eyes downcast—and during those times it would take a practiced eye as sharp as Merrihew’s to divine that she was speaking and that this was no mantric interval—any more than the occasional rhythmic manipulation of the simply designed, glittering little ornament at her throat was

meditative.

Therefore, while anyone might walk in and find an extremely restful, beautifully decorated room commanded by a startlingly pretty young woman at ease on a comfortable bench, a young woman who would put him at his ease unhurriedly, share his concerns for a moment, do what needed doing and then apparently retire quietly into her thoughts, there was actually a great deal more going on. In the moments between the ebbs and flows of people—who waited, who left, who delivered, who received, who were directed and ushered; who were greeted by suddenly appearing personnel from inside and led away, and who, twice that morning, included herds of awed children being given a tour through the plant—in these lulls when there was no one there but Merrihew and Agnes Kuhli (and each time she acknowledged this remote intimacy with a charming smile; never for a second did she seem unaware of him) his sharp ears extracted from the miracles of sound-absorbency around her some of the flood of detail she was handling. Flickers and pulses from little lights, quick touches from her long hands on illuminations and patches which could only be electrostatic switches, and the occasional radiance of the holoscreen, each elicited its quick manual or vocal response. Not that her every minute was crowded—far from it. It was in one of the occasional lulls that their eyes met—he saw to that, keeping his gaze fixed on her in peril of drying his eyeballs—and she gave him that incredible, sharing smile and said, “My—he’s keeping you here so long—” So caring, so concerned. “Here, I’ll just—”

Her fingers flickered on the console and her face was palely lit by the glow from the holoscreen, which was not in his view. “Lois, Mr. Merrihew’s been waiting so long—”

Lois, as expected, said whatever needed to be said and the glow died. “Something came up,” Miss Kuhli commiserated, “and Mr. Handel would like you to wait just a little longer, if you don’t mind.”

“I don’t mind,” Merrihew said heartily. He rose and approached her. “Miss Kuhli, would you mind very much showing me some of the things that console does? I’ve been watching you work and—”

“Of course I don’t mind!” she cried, this time with a real exclamation point. “That’s what I’m here for. What would you like to know?” As she spoke an amber light showed on what

seemed to be a solid piece of hand-rubbed walnut. Her hand hovered over it a moment and then stroked it. It disappeared.

"Well, practically everything," said Merrihew. "What was that, for example?" He pointed to the spot where the amber glow had been.

"Oh, Mr. Stamm isn't going out for lunch and he wants it sent in."

"That little light said all that?" She tinkled a laugh. "No, *he* did."

"I didn't hear anything."

"Naturally not." She lifted away some of her shining hair and revealed an ear which had obviously been designed by whomever it is that holds the patent on the chambered nautilus. Resting in the orifice was a glittering little gem of a device. There were no wires or brackets or anything else of the kind. "It's my personal receiver. I have one in the other ear too. Sometimes it's nice to hear with both ears but I can use either one—or both on two lines, if I have to."

"Microrange FM," Merrihew deduced.

"Yes! And I answered him the same way." She pointed to the jewel at her throat.

"You spoke to him?"

"Yes, I asked him if he'd like the usual and he said yes and thanked me and I said goodbye."

"All the time you were talking to me?"

"Well—between talking to you."

"Subvocals—is that it?"

"You do know a lot about it!" she said admiringly. Another amber spot showed on the board and she put out her hand. This time she touched the board right under the glow and it turned red. "I put him on 'hold,'" she explained. She waved at the end of the board and the bright numerals of a digital clock appeared (remaining in sight five seconds and then disappearing) and she said "It's Mr. Damiani in Design. He's been waiting all morning for hand delivery of some special components and he'll be wanting to know if they've arrived. I'll tell him no, not yet and I'll send them up the instant they arrive—and shall I call the factory again. Watch."

He leaned closer while she touched the red into amber. She smiled (and he recalled how many ventriloquists maintain a smile

the whole time the dummy is talking) and he was aware of the slightest possible murmur of her voice, the barest motion of her lips. Even forewarned, however, he could not distinguish the words. When she had finished he said, meaning it, "That's one of the most amazing things I've ever seen in my life." You also smell wonderful, he added, but not aloud.

"It isn't hard to learn," she said deprecatingly. "I don't suppose it's necessary, either, but you can see how nice it is in an open office like this—no bells and 'scuse-me's and plugs and wires. And it's the best possible demonstration of our new VIP. That's V.I.P.—Voice InPut system."

"What's that?"

"Well, the VIP System, the new M&H Computer Central. We centralize all the office functions—well, almost all—into one computer, but it's very special. We have access to it by voice. Some day," she went on with heart-stopping enthusiasm (oh, my, thought Merrihew, it's so easy to listen to this lady without hearing a thing: she is her own diversion, bless her), "we hope to be able to perfect a VIP system with access points all over an office. At this stage it's geared to operate through one person."

"You."

"And two others, with another girl in training," she went on. (The entire time she talked, the board glowed and flashed, her fingers moved, hovered, touched and rested.) "Look." She touched a point in the wall (or whatever it was) at the base of the console, and a drawer slid out. Inside were four small compartments. One was empty. Each of the others held two of the jeweled ear-sets and one such ornament as the one she wore on her throat. She took out one of these.

"Beautiful," said Merrihew, meaning whatever he meant.

She held up the throat device, meaning that. "There's no reason it shouldn't be. And it really is, inside and out. Really, some of the microcircuits in this thing are as beautiful as anything a jeweler ever turned out. I'll give you some literature on them before you go, if you like."

She paused, for the holoscreen lit up. Merrihew could see it now. It was nothing but a film of frosted plastic, perhaps sixteen by twenty inches and a very few sixteenths of an inch thick. At first blush one thought of rear projection, but it was far more than

that. It was like looking into a clear cube of glass in which was not the picture of a girl's face, but the girl's face itself. The pleasant blond apparition asked, "Aggie, is Mr. Merrihew still there?"

"That's Mr. Merrihew, looking over my shoulder."

"Oh," said the image, looking straight into his eyes, "Hello! I'm Miss Addamski, Mr. Handel's secretary. I'm so sorry to keep you like this. Truly, Mr. Handel will get to you just as soon as he can."

"That's all right," said Merrihew. "I'm in good hands, as you can plainly see." Miss Addamski smiled and faded away while Miss Kuhli (magnificent woman, he thought) managed to laugh at what he had said without giggling.

"Beautiful holograph."

"Would you believe Mr. Miroshi's not pleased with it yet? He still thinks a lot more can be done with the color rendition."

"It's so much better than the passionate pinks and sick greens I've been used to."

"Oh, thank you. Now, where were we?"

"At the jeweler's, I think."

"Oh, yes." She held up the throat device she had taken from the drawer. "You'll notice that all of them are twelve-sided, with a hole in the center. This is what makes it so quick and easy to learn. You think of a clock, you see. You pretend you have a clock, or watch on your throat. Now it's easy to locate which of the twelve sides is which number—two o'clock, seven o'clock, and so on. You can use it to dial a telephone number if you want to, for example, just by switching in here—" she touched the board and an amber light glowed "—or the intercom system, or paging, or to retrieve something from the files."

"I understand that everything stays in the M&H files, and what you really get is a copy."

"My! You really do know us. Yes—look, I'll show you." She touched the board, manipulated the jewel at her throat and a ten-by-twelve section of the board became a projection of a business letter. "That's for inspection," she explained, "just to be sure it's the one you want before you reproduce it. If it is, you just ..." and she touched the board at the right place and in five seconds a sheet of paper emerged from a slot—an exact duplicate of the letter.

“Really amazing. But where does the VIP system come in?”

“Oh, I had to show you the old way first.” She beamed. “Would you like to see that letter again, or another?”

“Let’s try another one.”

At that moment, a young man came in with a small package. Almost simultaneously, it seemed, a startlingly pretty young girl emerged from an inner door, took and signed for the package while the young man ogled her and Miss Kuhli, his head moving like that of an aficionado of table tennis, Miss Kuhli the while asking after his sick mother. And while this was going on the image of another letter appeared on the small screen. Miss Kuhli caught Merrihew’s nod, touched her control and by the time the young man and the secretary were gone the new letter was in his hands.

“I feel foolish,” said Merrihew, “like the audience of a magic act. How did you do that? I mean, when?”

Clearly she was enjoying herself. “Between the time I said hello to him and the time I asked after his mother. While he was handing the package to Sue.”

“You never touched your throat mike.”

“I used it, though. I switched here—” she showed him “—to activate the VIP, and then I simply told it the code/number of the letter I wanted.”

“Subvocally.”

“Yes, it seemed the best way at the time. But I didn’t have to. Oh, Mr. Stamm’s lunch—unfinished business. I can show you with that. Now, what I must do is call the restaurant. Let’s say I don’t know the number. I could look it up. Or I could—” she fingered the throat jewel “—call Information. Or I could use VIP. Like this—” and she touched a spot on the board. “VIP, what’s the number of the Blue Corner Restaurant?”

Before the words were out of her mouth the telephone number appeared in brightline numerals. “But I can do better than that.” She canceled her board, keyed VIP, and demanded: “Get me the Blue Corner.” Instantly the holoscreen lit up and they were looking at a young man in a blue apron, with all the surprising dimensionality of the M&H holoscreen. “Blue Corner. Oh,” said the young man, lighting up much as the screen had done. “Miss Kuhli! How are you, Miss Kuhli?”

“Fine, Ronnie. Ronnie, Mr. Stamm’s eating in today. Will you

send over the usual, a quarter to one?"

Devoutly, Ronnie vowed he would, waited for and got a Kuhli smile and rang off. "Marvelous," said Merrihew, and could think only to repeat the jaded word. "Marvelous. What you've done here at long last is to perfect the old impossible idea one finds in those silly science-fiction stories—the computer you can talk to, the robot that acts on spoken command."

"Mr. Miroshi says we have never perfected anything," said Miss Kuhli, "We merely produce the best. We're really a long way from the computer one can talk to, the way I'm talking to you. And as you see, we still have to acquaint the computer with a certain person—" she touched the jewel at her throat "—before it can be expected to respond reliably. VIP has to know a person's way of phrasing, the, diction, the normal vocabulary and what to accept in variations of emphasis. Poor VIP can't spell at all, you know. We still have to write our own letters, but he does make it a lot easier. Let me show you."

She brought out her typewriter, an act that consisted of pulling out from the edge of the console a fingerboard no, more than half an inch thick and pushing it inward again, which, with a click, made it assume the slight slant of the conventional keyboard and apparently complete rigidity. "It can afford to be as thin as this," she explained. "It's all electrostatic switches. The other parts are all in the computer." She touched the ON point, which lit up, along with the same screen on which he had seen the files. "Now we get some help from VIP," she said. She activated the system and said "Letterhead and date, please."

They appeared on the screen.

"To?"

"Mr. Handel. From me."

"To Mr. Handel, VIP." Neatly, in three lines properly spaced, there appeared on the screen Mr. Handel's name and title, room number, street address and zip code. A triple space and then: Dear Mr. Handel:

"Wow," said Merrihew, impressed yet again. He then began to dictate. Miss Kuhli's fingers flew. In a way it was eerie, for the typewriter made not the slightest sound, and there was no carriage, no paper, nothing but the shining words appearing on the screen one by one as he spoke. They were:

I have confirmed, and in a matter of minutes will prove to your satisfaction, that the source of the difficulty we discussed yesterday is in my present location.

No one is perfect, Mr. Handel, and the closest you can get to perfection is, as your partner remarked, to achieve the best there is at any moment. I concede that you have done this.

What I think you have overlooked is that your VIP system is set up for a perfect input. No person is perfect because no person is anyone single thing. Mood and pressure can turn one facet or another of a person to the front, despite the determination of that person not to let that happen. How easily it happens depends upon the person, but for everyone there is a point, a degree of pressure, at which the turn will occur and another “person” will present itself. But not quite another person, you see. To a computer finely tuned to one individual this must present a perplexing development. It can then only do what any of us do when perplexed—that is, make a good guess.

There is a common denominator in the two documents you showed me—the medical report delivered to your Math section and the treatise on aggression and hostility. Unless I am seriously in error—and I am not—Math was looking for a certain regular series of figures, probably daily, in the preparation of a graph of some sort. VIP was asked for “abscissas” and came up with “abscesses.” In the other case a request for information on the *antipodes* got a response which concerned *antipathies*. There is only one place in the world where each of these couples is pronounced almost identically, and that is in the part of New York City known as the West Bronx.

“Why—I was born in the West Bronx!” exclaimed Miss Kuhli.

“Think of that,” said Merrihew. “Shall we go on?”

They went on.

One of the many facets of the human being capable of

being turned to the front under stress is the blind spot, Mr. Handel. The fact that every one of the troublesome events you listed occurred on the same shift, with the same operator, completely escaped you and everyone else who saw the list. Doubtless it would have escaped me as well had I met Miss Kuhli before I saw it instead of afterward. As I dictate this it also becomes clear that in spite of the distress this matter has caused you, and the thoroughness of your investigation, no one to this moment has checked with her. No one, least of all Miss Kuhli, would even begin to believe she could do any wrong.

“Now let’s hold it right there, Mister,” said Agnes Kuhli harshly. “I work hard and I do the best I know how, so what kind of con is this ‘do any wrong’?”

“Miss Kuhli,” said Merrihew gently, “your West Bronx is showing.” She glared at him hotly for a long moment. He held her gaze and radiated as much calm as he could. Merrihew could, when he cared to, radiate a great deal of it. She subsided from fury to sullenness and took her eyes away to scan down the words on the screen. “Never in life,” she growled—it was a real growl—“could I get so uptight that I’d make such a stupid—” Her voice trailed off as she fixed her brilliant eyes on a word. “‘Antipodes.’ Oh. Oh, that was the time he—” Surprisingly, delightfully, she colored to the earlobes.

“You don’t have to tell me or anyone about it. But you were under stress, right? And VIP took your *antipodes* as *antipathies* and gave Marketing a psychiatric lecture instead of a trade report.”

“And the other time, the abscissas. That was when he threatened me that if I didn’t—”

“Shh,” he interrupted. “I don’t have to know as long as you do.” He waved a hand. “Type.”

Office efficiency dictates that an office chair be designed to avoid low back pains. The comfort and well-being of the employee is important, of course, but the truly basic thrust is the accommodation of the whole human being to the office environment. VIP is so sophisticated that such a simple basic can be overlooked. Unless and until VIP can be programmed to respond unfailingly to its operator in

any mood—laughing, furious, frightened, weary—it should be used only in periods of complete calm. Unless VIP can accommodate all the facets of a human being—the irrational child, the bigot, the daydreamer, the wishful thinker, the spring-feverish, as well as it does the carefully schooled office presence, I recommend that it go back to the drawing boards until it can.

You'll get my bill in the morning. Right now I'm taking Miss Kuhli to lunch.

MERRIHEW

Ingenious Aylmer

Ejler Edgar Aylmer (nobody has a name like Ejler Edgar Aylmer) had this inheritance and this basement workshop. They had come to him in that order and both were enormous. I dropped in one day to borrow a turret lathe and there he was, fiddling with the controls of a Z-shaped console. I had to thump him before he could answer me, because of the helmet. “Oh, hi,” he said. “It’s my reorganizer.”

“What’s it do?”

“I’ll show you.” Replacing the helmet, he punched rapidly on a terminal keyboard. Then he pulled a knobbed stick marked REORG, and it was lights-out for the machine. He took off the helmet and looked around. “How about that!” he said, mighty pleased.

“How about what?” I said, which made him roar with glee. He then asked me how many hours there are in a day. I looked down at my fingers and said, “Fourteen.”

“Okay. And who rules the United States?”

“The Royal Council, of course,” I said, correctly bobbing from the knees.

“And if I told you that when you walked in here you had eight fingers and two thumbs, and General Superfudd was Our Leader?”

I counted my fingers. “You better explain that to me, Ejler Edgar.”

“Well, I can’t, not really. But I can give you an analogy. Consider the whole universe a kind of computer bank. The computer can make every bit of information in it consistent with every other bit, by rearranging them. When you come up with an impossible bit—pigs with wings, say—it is ordinarily rejected as impossible nonsense. But if you put it into this terminal, the universe has to accept it no matter what, and will reorganize the whole universe, if necessary, to make it a fact. Pull the handle, and you’ll be living with real winged pigs.”

I looked at the machine and didn’t believe it. “Try it yourself,” said Ejler Edgar. “But put on the helmet, otherwise you won’t be

able to remember how the universe was before you reorganized it.”

I put on the helmet, thought a moment, then typed out on the console the most impossible thing I could think of: MIRRORS REVERSE IMAGES RIGHT TO LEFT BUT NOT UP TO DOWN. At his nod, I pulled the big handle.

Everything kind of *blinked*, and I was standing in an empty cellar wearing that stupid helmet. I looked at my hands, I still had eight fingers and two thumbs, but now they’re on two hands, for God’s sake, and there are 24 hours in a day, and what’s-his-name’s in the White House, and every time I look in a mirror it reverses everything right to left, but not up to down. Try it yourself.

And there’s nobody to explain it to me. As I said, nobody has a name like Ejler Edgar Aylmer. Nobody.

The Sheriff of Chayute

The town came out of its houses, the propped-up weathered ones and the ones with the newly planted white pickets, out of the mercantile and the livery and even the Bat's Wing, and stood in the wide flat dusty street to watch the cloud in the southeast. They'd known for a week it would come, but it should have come yesterday, and they couldn't understand that. Billy Willow, who ran the mercantile, said so to the sheriff.

Ev Charger was the sheriff of Chayute, a gangly, ice-eyed man with the knack of keeping his heartbeat slow. He contemplated the cloud and couldn't understand either why it was a day late. "But anyhow, no use hopin' they won't come," he said, and with those words set himself like a clock, knowing what the message would have to be as the hours went by.

A lady stopped and called out from the duckboards: "You, Ev Charger, mind you keep a sharp eye on those—those ruffians. Chayute isn't what it was, and they'd best learn that. We will not tolerate—"

"Yes ma'am," the sheriff said evenly. From between Mrs. Finnan's bright china teeth, and out of her dried-apricot face, had come the same public speech a week ago, and this would be the eleventh time since. Billy said sharply, "Now, Martha, when the sheriff comes into your place an' tells you how much a yard to sell dimity, you've a right to tell him how to run his business. Did he do that yet?"

Mrs. Finnan sniffed and did not respond to that, but said, "A blessing when the railroad goes through," and walked on. Charger wondered about that. The railroad wouldn't come within forty miles of Chayute, and the word had been around for years now that more and more cattle were riding to market, arriving rested and soft. It would mean the end of the big drives for sure. Chayute would survive with farms and maybe the mine but it would be a very different breed of town. Well it already was. Billy was saying, "I'd be a devil's damfool to call that a blessing." A cattle drive meant a lot to the mercantile and the saloon and a

couple other kinds of places, though a lot of the rest would keep their doors open only out of a sort of defiance. And given their druthers, half the houses in Chayute would like to have boarded up their shutters or gophered clear underground. Then "Priss," snapped Billy Willow, "you come here."

The prettiest girl in town, yes and prettier than anything in the next four towns north and three east, stepped off the duckboards and came to her daddy. Billy was a laughter-beaten, weather-wrinkled little hickory stick of a man, and for all his endless good nature, his kids obeyed him in a way that would be the envy of a colonel in the cavalry. Ev Charger was going to ask Billy one day how that was done. "Yes, Daddy."

Billy peered into the glowing face. Priss Willow had skin smooth as a new-blown magnolia and there's a western tree called jacaranda which blooms a unique blue with lavender in it: Priss Willow's eyes. "You got color on, girl?"

She got some then. "Oh no, Daddy."

Billy peered close again. "Well good then. Go help your maw."

"Yes, Daddy." She smiled shyly at the sheriff, which made him want to blink his eyes, and they watched her move away—a pleasure. She'd a way of moving unlike other folk, who just have to move up and down a little with each step. She did not.

Ev Charger thought to ask then and there, "How do you get your kids to mind you so, Billy? For sure it wasn't with a willow switch."

"Oh, I been known to wave one," said Billy, and laughed. Then he saw it was a straight question. Younguns grow yeast in their veins at a certain time, and the bubbles come in a lot of ways, not all of them good. The town had had its fair share of this in recent days as cattle became less to it and crops and the mine more, and they had to put a third room on the schoolhouse and those neat little pickets began to show along the street. Some of this yeasting became sheriff's business, and what to do was forever a puzzler.

Billy said, "No kid's a bad kid, whatever they say about blood. If you believe that, they know it and don't get bad. Only other thing you got to do is give 'em something that says 'thus far you can go, an' no farther.' It really don't make no difference what it is, you know. There's got to be a wall around 'em somewhere. Somepin for 'em to kick against. They call it a wall but they know it's a shelter." He came closer to talk privately, laughed again and

said, "I don't give a hoot owl's holler if Priss powders up a bit, leastwise not more'n her maw does, but she don't know that."

They stood together watching the loom of the dust cloud over the late-lit southwest hills. Charger knew from the talk that they were both thinking the same thing, talking about the same thing—in the middle of that cloud was a hard-jawed kid name of Hank Shadd, yes and the old man who had made him what he was. Nobody ever built a wall around Hank, unless it was all those things that go to make a man out of a boy. And it was Olman Shadd's idea of what makes a man—that is, to know what you want and go for it in straight lines. Two years ago they'd driven through here and Hank had first seen Priss Willow. Last year he had first *seen* her: a sizable difference; and she certainly saw him at the same time, which was why the color on her face just now, whether or not it was rouge pot or yeast.

Ev Charger knew the Shadds well and from way back. Olman Shadd was only a loose handful of years older than Charger, but even when Charger was a wet-eared calfing they were calling Olman Shadd "the Old Man." Like a lot of other lawmen of the time, Charger had cows in his history. His first drive, and that was a long while back, had been under Olman Shadd—and Shadd had already bossed four of them, handling a crew of rannies older, and some bigger than he was. You did what he said because he never gave an order that didn't make sense; he knew his country and his cows and his men. If you couldn't figure out the sense you did it anyway, and right now, because he was a man who would back up an order with fists or feet or bullets if need be, no matter what, even "please pass the salt." Ev Charger never ran afoul with him but once, and that was on his first drive, when he had maybe more enthusiasm than knowledge or care, and one night tiredly hobbled his roan with a granny knot. It took him forty daylight minutes to catch his mount the next morning, and the Old Man waved him up from where he had been riding flank—a real kindness to an apprentice. "Ride drag," was all the Old Man said, and young Ev dropped back and for five days drank dust with his nostrils and chewed it with his eyelids and spat it out in gritty tears, wading through cowflop the whole time, and contemplating the craft of carefulness.

He saw the shape and place of the cloud and said to Billy Willow, "They'll be camping by the ford and they should have the

cows put to bed by just past sundown. Reckon they'll blow in about nine o'clock."

Yes, nine o'clock, full dark, thirsty and all the rest that goes with it—and it was Shadd's way to make up for a tight rein by discarding bridle and bit when the time came. "It'll be a noisy night," said Billy Willow, with absolute understanding, and went to see to his store.

And it was ten after nine in the darkening town when they first heard the gunshots—pinpricks of sound lengthening into crooked-y hollow tubes of it, laying out along the echoing foothills, yes, and hoofbeats and a lot of idiot yipping. Ev Charger came out of his office and walked quietly up the boards to the Bat's Wing, while the townsfolk popped out of their doors to listen and back in again to hide, like a whole row of those wooden cuckoos on a Bavarian clock. Charger stepped out into the street and hung one of his shoulderblades on the high hitching rail in front of the Bat's Wing Saloon and waited. Shadd's men raced in in a sort of barely controlled stampede, probably because of some brainless poke's wager about the last man buying the first drink. That game somehow got lost at the sight of the sheriff, though all he did was get his shoulder off the rail and stand up straight.

He looked up at them and nodded. "Howdy, Shadd."

The Old Man reined close but didn't begin to dismount. A mounted man has special advantages. His view is better and his range is wider and it's natural (except for a smoothbore bird-killer) to shoot straight or down rather than upwards. But most of all, he's looking down on you, specially if he's slab-jawed, grizzled, cold-eyed Olman Shadd. "Howdy, Ev," he said in a voice like granite sliding on granite. He called the sheriff by his name, which was a kindness, for after losing his horse that time Ev Charger had been known as Granny for a hard-fought season.

Charger looked around at the others. Some he knew, had ridden with 'way back. Billy Oats was there, face blowtorched and hair frosted by the years, Injun John, Juice Jaw (did he ever have another name? Awake or asleep he carried a great bulge of tobacco-cud in one side of his face, and he had a whole vocabulary of spits), Neil was there, absolutely untouched by all those years, and Adams who had taught him that when you point your finger at something, even over your shoulder or behind your

back, you do it with surprising accuracy, so that if you lay your index finger along the barrel of your gun and point, you can shoot off the back doorknob of a barroom from a batwing doorway. And tight-lipped young Hank Shadd, of course, looking for someone. Then there were some more men he didn't know, and didn't have to, really, to understand that they were the same hard riders, hard drinkers, and hardnosed brawlers as the rest. "Howdy, boys. Juicy. Neil. Hey Injun. Billy ..." They grunted their greetings. Juicy spat pleasure. Then Charger added, "I'll want your guns."

It got very quiet. But for the half-lathered horses, it got so quiet for so long that Charger had the crazy idea that nobody would move or say a word at all forever and ever. And the funny thing was, nobody looked at him. They were all looking at Old Man Shadd. Looking to him.

Shadd said, "What's that you say?" So the sheriff said it again.

"Why is that, Ev?" the Old Man asked too quietly.

Juicy spat wonderment.

"It's the law," said Charger. "Nobody totes iron here after sundown."

"Wasn't so last year," said Shadd.

"Right, sir. Town ordinance. You want to see the book?"

"No, I don't want to see the book. Take your word." A sudden something lit up Shadd's steady eyes. Juicy recognized it for what it was, and spat fury. Shadd thumbed a dollar out of his Levi's and flicked it ringing into the air and caught it. "Tell you what I'll do, so we don't git into no outnumbered argymint here. You call it, Sheriff, and if you win the toss we'll do as you say."

"Mister Shadd," said Charger, because if Shadd had to call him Sheriff, he had to call Shadd Mister. "Mister Shadd, I am just through telling you what the law is here. Now a law that rests on the turn of a dollar is no law at all, so I cain't play it like that."

Shadd's nostrils expanded a whole lot and from them there issued a sharp strong hiss. Charger knew that one well. So did Juicy, who spat danger. The sheriff held tight until he saw Shadd's mouth open to say the one word that would commit everyone to one course or the other, and then cut in swiftly but softly: "Why tote guns? Ain't you-all the match for unarmed townsfolk without 'em?" But he smiled a little while he said it.

Shadd exploded with a roar—it was a tense two seconds before

anyone could be sure that the noise was laughter. He was not laughing so much at the ludicrous picture the sheriff had conjured up as at the ingenuity of the trap Charger had set for him. With a suddenness that made the sheriff's gun-hand cramp, Shadd clapped his hand to his belt ... unbuckled it, handed it down. And before he collected the others, Charger unbuckled his own. Juicy spat wonderment.

"Have a good time," said Charger, mounting the walk with his load of belts.

It was a noisy night. Before it was done everyone hated Ev Charger—or so he thought. Mrs. Finnan sent word for him to come see her right now, and what crazy idea he had in his head about her and one of Shadd's men he wouldn't admit even to himself. But she was safe and sound, bolted snug inside her darkened drygoods, peering out to look for him. When he came she shot the bolt back, spun him inside and whipped the door to again as if the invaders were not men but a grasshopper plague. "You've got to stop it," she said angrily.

"Stop what?"

"All that noise in the saloon."

"Noise, Miz Finnan?"

"And cursing and swearing."

"What they been saying, Miz Finnan?"

"You know I wouldn't repeat any of it!"

"'Course not," said the sheriff. "I just wanted to be sure you heard anything."

"You know trail-riders!"

"Yep. Ma'am: Just what did you hear?"

"They were singing," she said defiantly.

He concentrated very hard on his hat, which his hands were turning round and round without really being told to. He said, "Miz Finnan, a trail rider is up an' around before the sun is. He finds his horse in the dark an' most usually he's got three hours hard work before he gets so much as a mug o' coffee. Whatever's lost he finds. Whatever's busted he fixes. He cain't be everywhere at once but he tries. He rides when it's wet, when it's cold, when it's both at once an' muddy to boot. He eats dust an' everything in the world smells of cow, an' he don't get to town much at all. An' when he does, are you goin' to begrudge him singin' a song?"

None of his words were angry words but apparently his tone of voice betrayed him. He hadn't shouted but she quailed as if he had, and then marched to the door and snapped it open. "You're as bad as they are, Ev Charger. You used to be one of them and you still are." He went out and walked back up the street. He had a funny thought: folks sometimes said "the face of the city," in the papers or a book. He'd never thought of Chayute having a face, and he wondered now if its face looked like Martha Finnan's. If it did it was mad at him, and not in any way he could do anything about.

His office was next door to the doctor's. The doctor had the only place in town with a doorway set back from the walk, and someone was in the doorway. It wasn't the doctor because the place was dark. Charger paused and heard a couple of people talking quietly. It was a weird way of talking:

Priss Willow's soft smooth voice: "I had five whole years of schoolin' already, and I'll get two more at least."

Hank Shadd, with his father's grate already begun, but overlaid with unsureness, shyness: "I didn't exactly get shot. I got powder burns all over my hand."

"Maw says my apple pies as good as hers. She says if I get the trick with the crust it'll be better."

"Woke up in the first light, there's this diamondback not two feet away."

"I could become a dressmaker too, if I wanted. But I druther—no, I won't tell you that."

"Wasn't coiled up yet so I knew I c'd git to him before that first strike. So I grabbed him right behind the head."

"Maw says I should be a schoolteacher. She says schoolteachers git the best kind of husbands."

"Helt him to the ground with the one hand, got m' gun with th'other, blowed his head off."

"Daddy's like that too, but he just likes the idea of me teachin'."

"Burnt m'hand, scared h—uh, beg pardon, scared the boys half out of their skin and my dad too."

Charger went quietly into his office without bothering them, and wagging his head. Priss a-rambling on one line, Hank on another, and both of them doubtless thinking something else. He remembered something Billy once said: "Don't never listen to a

word folks say, Ev—listen to what they mean.”

He took a medicinal shot from the quart in his bottom drawer, thinking a little wistfully what it was like in the saloon, not that they'd mind if he walked in, but it couldn't be the same. He started out. He didn't mean to be extra quiet, or maybe he did.

“They're sayin' it'll all be Herefords and the longhorn's on the way out.”

“It was blue with little gores here and some lace.”

“Hereford don't even look like a beef. Like a oversize dog.”

“Took off the sleeves and put in darts so they'd puff way out.”

“Ride in steam cars like a dude.”

What that really is, Charger thought as he moved upstreet, is railway talk. The two rails don't ever meet either, but they get along together just fine.

Then he began to run. The noise he heard wasn't a loud one, and he barely heard it at all what with the bumbling roar issuing from the saloon. It was one short syllable, but the kind of forced, sharp sound that means trouble.

He ran past the saloon and up to the livery. In the dark mouth of the entrance was a flicker of movement, and hard breathing. Two figures were locked together back there in the spilled hay, and as Charger slid to a halt one of them—Barney, the livery's owner—broke free and dived toward him. No, not to him, but to the shelf over the bill table. He reached between two account books and his hand came out with a gun in it. He whirled toward the other man, who was on his feet ready to rush.

Charger had a hard arm around Barney's throat and the other hand on his gun wrist before anyone, including the sheriff, knew he had moved. “Drop it, Barney. Drop it!”

“I'll kill the—”

“The hell you will.” Charger gave a sudden surge, bent the elbow, surprisingly released the grip across Barney's neck and used the freed hand to take the gun.

The other man was one of Shadd's riders, one that Charger didn't know. He was a tall thin one, round-shouldered and gaunt, and he was wall-eyed mad. Not so much that he couldn't check himself, though. “What's this about?”

“Come in here an' found him stealin'.”

The gaunt man took a leaping pace nearer—but stopped. “You're a stinkin' liar,” he said, and knocked wet off his chin with

the back of his hand. He spoke to Ev: "I come in here and knocked and hollered and there wasn't nobody. All I wanted was oats for my hoss, he hasn't had good grazing in three days now. An' this bastard comes out of no place and licks me with a ax-handle."

Charger didn't believe him. With total enthusiasm he did not believe him. On the other hand who was to prove the truth? And if Barney came by for a look and saw a stranger fanning through the back bins, who could blame him? But then—he wasn't going to think of what would have happened in Chayute that night if a town man had shot a rider he himself had disarmed.

"You get on back to the saloon," he told the rider. "Barney, you'll get your gun back in the mornin'. No guns after sundown means you too."

They both opened their mouths to protest, looked at each other and then at Charger, who wasn't holding the gun on them but sure hadn't put it away. The rider spat near their feet and went on back to the saloon.

"You shouldn'ta gone for this, Barney."

"Guess you're right, Ev, but what would *you* do?"

Charger grinned briefly. "Same thing." He clapped Barney's shoulder and went out. A running man half-knocked him off his feet. "Billy, f'God's—"

This was a Billy Willow he'd never seen before, out of breath, frantic. He clutched at Charger's leather vest. "Priss's gone!"

"Now you jus' git yourself together an' come along with me."

Billy began to shout. "I didn't raise that girl to run with the likes of that sprat of Olman Shadd's. I tell you he's going to deal with me, I'll see to it he never fouls my nest or anyone else's. He —"

"Now hush," said Charger, but it didn't work, or not soon enough. Three Shadd men had been drawn out of the saloon by the ruckus, and one of them was the Old Man himself.

"I'll handle it," Charger said as he propelled Willow on by. It came out like a warning.

"'Likes of that sprat of Olman Shadd's?'" The Old Man turned to a rider. "You hear something like that?"

It was Juicy, who spat yes.

Charger pointed into the doctor's doorway. "There you go, Billy." And immediately there emerged a frightened Priss and a

lowering Hank. Charger flicked a glance behind him. The three had followed them, and more besides.

Billy Willow snatched the girl by the shoulders and whirled her half around. "You git yourself home and go to your room. I'll deal with you later." With a terrified look at Hank, the girl fled. Billy whirled on the blinking boy. "As for you, you rotten randy little goat, you'll stay away from my Priss or you'll answer to me. If ever I see you—"

"Stop right there, Billy," Charger said coldly. He had never in his life spoken to this wise, happy little man like this, but then it was a Billy he'd never seen before.

Then the Old Man was there like a tidal wave curling and about to break. To Billy he grated, "He really ain't good enough for her, that it? Well, let me tell you something, he don't need to sniff around any pasty-faced, bandy-legged—"

"You too, Shadd," snapped Charger, and found himself immensely astonished. "Anything you say now you'll wish you hadn't in the mornin' an' you both know it."

Young Hank Shadd spoke up. "I'm here to tell you I never—" and as if the same string had pulled them the sheriff and both fathers told him to shut his mouth. And that was the end of it until the next afternoon, for after one more sullen round, the riders picked up their weapons and left town.

Charger was in his office poring over the county chart when the kid ran in with the bad news. The sheriff had been at it for an hour and a half—he didn't really know why. Maybe it was because of the trail-riders last night. Nobody but a damn fool stays with the trails year after year—which is why every drive had its share of damn fools—but like railroading or going to sea or some other things you never did quite get all the grit pumped out of your blood. Charger liked where he was and what he was doing, but all the same some small part of him went jingling out with them to the smell of cow and the brainless bawling, and the good ache of a long hard day, and trail food sauced by a real working man's appetite.

His finger traced the old trail up from the lush land to the southwest which had bred the herd. He knew those hills, and that alkali patch—twice he'd had stampede crossing that, when the steers smelt the waterhole. Yonder was the place he picked off a

cougar with one shot, and saved a calf. Over there the ford that was flooded when they got to it, and still they beat across and lost only seven head.

And here the black new marks on the chart, the rail line. Crews had pioneered the roadbed last summer and would have the rails in this year, and that would be about the end of the old trail. They'd brought in powder gangs and blasted through a hogback—now that would've been a blessing back in his day. Look how the trail had to wind, better than forty miles around. Now you could drive your steers straight through and save a day, or would until the rails were in.

Save a day. Days were money. Shadd had lost a day, somewhere.

Somewhere? Right there! He put his finger on the place. Old Man Shadd had unaccountably crossed the railroad right-of-way and kept with the long looping old trail, instead of cutting through. You'd think he'd jump at the chance to use the new road, after what the new road was doing to the old ways he was so hitched to.

Charger was wagging his head in puzzlement over this when the kid burst in. "Mister Kelly says Hank Shadd is in the saloon, he's been drinkin' and workin' up a mad."

The whole thing came to Charger in a single blaze. Once he had been inside the skin of a lad like that, and he knew—he knew as if he had been through last night and this morning, every second of it, along with Hank Shadd. Aggrieved, insulted, called names and told to shut up ... yes, and in love to boot; and with "be a man" as his weaning-pap, every day of his life until now. Only nobody really ever told him how. So the kidding, the new name—what would they call him? Randy? Billy goat? Probably he had to fight a couple of them last night and this morning. And the Old Man wouldn't be much help. "Ride drag," is all he'd say. Yes, and back he'd go, and he'd be mad, and he'd think of a flower-face and let the beef clatter past him, stay behind, ride to town, try to be a man by drinking up his mad.

Charger snatched up his gun-belt and ran, strapping it around him. He knew where to go—the mercantile. He stopped near it to knot the thong around his thigh, and by the time he straightened up there was Hank Shadd, mounted and sitting too straight. Charger called him but he wouldn't hear. Hank ranged up before

the mercantile and called out in a choked voice, "Willow!"

Billy Willow's head appeared at the door and popped back again.

"Send her out, Willow. I got something to say to her."

An upstairs window swung open and there was the magnolia face, crinkled, the jacaranda eyes horrified. And Billy Willow stamped out on the duckboards, a graying bantam—Billy with a gun-belt on!

"She has nothing to say to you. Now git."

"She's comin' out or I'm comin' in." He stepped his horse a pace closer.

Billy hung his hand over his holster. His voice was thick, and the veins at the sides of his neck stood out like fence-posts. "Try getting' past me an' you're dead."

Upstreet, the sound of hooves galloping in.

The window above was empty.

"If that's really it, then," said the boy, and went for his gun. There was a hoarse grating shout just behind Charger, but he paid it no mind. He drew and shot Hank Shadd out of his saddle. He put away his gun before he turned and saw the Old Man spring down from a wheezing mount and run to the boy. He wasn't there ahead of Priss Willow, though. The girl was down beside him, his head in her lap, and she had a fine proud glare of disgust for Ev Charger and all the world besides.

Shadd knelt briefly by the wounded man and then stood up and turned to face the sheriff.

"Shoulder," he said. And he said to the girl, "Will you watch over him?"

She put her arms around Hank's head. Behind her, Ev could see a shocked-sober Billy Willow raise his hands and drop them in defeat. Then he grinned a little—thank the Powers, Billy Willow's own old smile. He came over to where Charger and the Old Man were standing and though nobody asked him, he said, "I sent her off to bed and it's the first time she ever disobeyed me, she slipped away to talk to him there in the doorway but I didn't know where she was."

Nobody asked Shadd to explain either, but he said, "Made him ride drag. Don't know why I thought to come back and look, but he was gone and I knowed he'd come here."

Charger knew that was as far as either would ever go in the

way of apology. He said, "You raise a young'un to mind you, and one day he don't, why, it must be pretty important."

They all looked at the young couple. The doctor had come out. The Old Man said, "He's in good hands. I'll be by after the drive."

He mounted his horse and looked down on them. "Hey, Ev," he said. "I knew we could make it be just like old times, a shootin' an' everything, and that sheriff we was always lookin' for, that would back up one of my boys." Then he smiled: it was the first Ev Charger had ever seen on that face. He said something that explained why he had taken the old trail and scorned the bright easy scar of the railroad right-of-way. "I knew we could do it—one more time."

"I'll buy you a drink," said Billy Willow, and did, and for the trail drivers, that was the last of the good old days.

The Mysterium

“Metaphysics,” said the newsboy, “is a misnomer to begin with, and has been misunderstood, misused and unappreciated ever since.”

“Ever since what?” demanded the Bump. (She had two aspects, depending. The other one was the Grind.)

“Ever since a librarian called Andronicus of Rhodes called it that.” He threw me an aside: “Andronicus was a sort of Köchel to Aristotle.” Always explaining the obscure with the incomprehensible.

“What’s a cookle?” I asked.

“Not ‘cookle,’ dummy—Köchel,” said the Bump. She had to make her mouth like kissing to say the name. Nice. “He’s the one that catalogued all of Mozart’s work.” She turned back to the newsboy. “So about metaphysics.”

“Oh, Aristotle wrote this book called *Physics*. Then he wrote another book, and Andronicus called it—” he spoke a word which I can’t write down here, because it was Greek—“which means ‘The treatises after the treatises on physics.’ The ‘meta-’ means ‘after’—like ‘one thing after another,’ that’s all. And ever since then people have made it some kind of foggy set of laws and systems parallel to physics, and’ve mixed it all up with spiritualism and psychic phenomena and I don’t know what all. Aristotle’s book wasn’t about any of that.”

“Well, what was it about?”

“Reality.”

I heaved a noisy sigh. “Familiar ground at last.” I hate it when he and the Bump talk about what I don’t know about and they do.

“Sure,” said the newsboy. He held up two fingers. “Is there a single thing everything else comes from, or many? Is there a single idea or, he called it, Spirit, that all ideas come from? That’s what it was about.”

“Sure,” I responded, and it sounded ’way different. None of that sounded very real to me.

The Bump said, "That ... is ... *heavy*. Covers about all the philosophy there is, doesn't it?"

He gave her that surprised-pleased look at this like when he gulped the glass of milk only it was eggnog. "Right!" he said, and went off to peddle his papers.

"Bastard," said the Bump. She mimicked him: "Right! ... right, you bubble-headed female, who'd ever think *you'd* understand anything—any of you." She hit the top of her typewriter so hard it went ding. "How is it we have a moon dome and a cure for nine kinds of cancer and we still have to put up with male chauvinist piggery like that?"

"I guess because we still have papers and paper boys," I said. "He bugs me too."

"Did he give you the money this month?"

"Yeah."

"Damn." She was genuinely disappointed. For reasons too complicated and too trivial to explain, his office utilities were on our bill and he was supposed to give us the cash every month. If he didn't get around to it the Bump would climb his back about it. In addition she never thought it was enough. She suspected him of living in his office as well as working in it. She would stop in the middle of some complicated wheelie-dealie and demand to know if I smelled bacon cooking. Sometimes I thought I did too, but I always said no. I didn't give a damn about that or the utility money either. She didn't, I don't think, not really, but somehow or other she had to get one-up. What she really wanted was for me—me!—to jimmy into his place when he wasn't there and look for dirty dishes. Or like the woman-immemorial: march right in to him and say.... None of which I dare voice to her. One male chauvinist pig in her sights was enough. The Bump exploding all over my office at me, I did not need. Given a little slack (let her call me dummy once in a while if it did her good) she was what's called a valuable employee. "Back to work."

"I was working."

"When I walked in here you were gumming with Smiley about metaphysics." Smiley was not his name. He was the surliest and most ill-mannered man I ever met, so behind his back we used to call him Smiley.

She gave me the exasperated look and started an album. The eight-foot wide tank emitted two thumping discords and a shriek

and exploded into a mass of whirling colors which fuzzed and resolved themselves into the Catalyst, which is my heaviest group and my biggest headache. Number four on the charts, which is great. Number four for nine weeks now without moving—that's spooky. They blared and tinkled and whomped until I put my hands over my ears. I don't know anything about music, but I know what I like. I also know that whether or not I like something has nothing to do with whether I can sell it. That was a hard thing to learn and the secret of my success. I'm the best woodstocker that ever was. "What the hell is that?"

The Bump yanked out the holo-cube in mid-honk. The silence almost made me bite my tongue. The Bump squinted at the label. " 'Metaphysical Mope.' "

"Oh. So he came in while you were playing it and that started the argument."

"He says it's Scriabin."

"Let me work my own way through that. Archaic Moldavian slang meaning both 'scream' and 'scratch.' He's right."

"No, dummy," she said, and then, I think in spite of herself, laughed and nodded. "I think you have a point there. Scriabin was a composer."

"I know. But that's not Scriabin, it's pure Catalyst. Jomo Delahanty writes everything for the group and he wrote that. Anyone who ever heard the Cat and hears this new one would tell you that."

"Right," agreed the Bump—but ominously. "Just what the newsboy said. They're *all* Scriabin."

"What!"

"Except for 'Moongut.' " ('Moongut' was Catalyst's first million seller.) "That was Dvorak." She picked up a note from her desk. "Quartet in D minor." She was enjoying this. She has a very evil sense of humor.

I sat down mostly because I had to. "You don't know what you're saying."

"Right. I didn't say it—the newsboy did."

As if on cue he kicked the door open and shoved something flat into my hands. I said Hey! and he said Later and left. It all went just that fast. I looked at the something flat. I hadn't seen one in years. Not a new one, anyway. I have eleven of them and they're priceless. Audio discs, twelve inches, 33 1/3 rpm. This one was

monophonic. “*Mono!*” I must have shouted it. Now this I had never seen before, though I’d heard of them.

“What is it?” the Bump demanded.

“Scriabin.” I got up and started back for my display. “Mono, by God.” My display is my pride and joy. Among the plaques and trophies in gold cubes are replicas of every kind of record player that ever was, from Edison’s hand-cranked wax cylinder to the big eight-footer with its holograph tank and octophonic surround. There’s a hand-wound clockwork Victor acoustic with a horn like a lily-flower and a deadly looking Atwater Kent with an S-shaped megaphone and fourteen knobs. I went to the Magnavox. It used to have glass “tubes”—sort of electronic valves with a hot filament, absolutely unobtainable now, so the amp was solid-state, but otherwise it was perfect. I switched it on and put the disk on the turntable and did the thing that made the stylus swing over and lower itself to the spiral groove. Very quaint, very camp. It had a rumble and a hum and a wow and a hiss, all at once, and the sound was peculiarly flat, a single source split eight ways through my speakers. It was a piano solo, it was called “Sonata Number Two,” and sure as hell it was “Metaphysical Mope.”

“The dirty lying little grave-robber,” I said, meaning Delahanty. “Where is he?”

The Bump knew who I meant. “Where you sent him, woodstocking at the Groundhog Festival in Punxsutawney.”

“I’ll kill him.”

“Not while he’s in the top ten,” said the Bump reasonably. “Wait till he’s off the charts.”

“Which will be in about forty-eight hours if this gets out.”

“Oh, I don’t know. Stealing is so common in this lousy business it’s almost a virtue.”

“Not unless it’s public domain. It could get me into bad trouble.”

“Aristotle wrote a lot about ethics too,” said the Bump, “and I can’t say for sure, but I don’t think he’d go along with stealing even from public domain.”

“Aristotle never had to phase in with contracts and residuals and payola and media seduction.”

“Well what are you going to do?” asked the Bump, which was the head-on point which I was try to shout my way away from. What am I going to do. This Scriabin operated a long time ago

—“Find out how long ago was this Scriabin.”—and maybe we’re home free with the public domain number. Maybe it would even help, give us class. Did any group ever get hurt stealing from Tchaikovsky? Chopin? Grieg? Leadbelly? “Maybe what we should do is nothing. And nobody ever bothers.”

At which the Bump did a delicate muscular thing with the architecture of her nostrils and snorted. With marvelous mimicry she unfolded an imaginary copy of the *Daily New Downbeat* (you could tell because the *DNB* has a funny way of folding page one) and read the imaginary headline: “‘CAT CRIBS CLASSICS. Jomo Delahanty a JD? Woodstocker claims ignorance of real music.’ Those are the headlines and subheads. Here’s the body copy: ‘Woodstocker Sol U. Rock, whose real name is reputed to be Edward Smith, conceded yesterday in the face of overwhelming evidence that the works of Jomo Delahanty, gangling nexus of the Catalyst, are lifted bodily from the century-old works of one Alexander N. Scriabin. The woodstocker protested that the theft was done without his knowledge and in the face of his complete innocence, or ignorance, of the nature of classical music or indeed the nature of any music.’ ”

“Stop.” I said it straight, with a good hard thump, but she went right on reading her imaginary paper. “Noted musicologist Harrison Twixt, contacted at his ranch in the Mojave, claims to have had in preparation for a long time an exposé of the Delahanty fraud, and suggests that the Catalyst has gone as high as four on the charts by Comrade Scriabin’s excellence, and has failed to go any higher because of Delahanty’s interference with the original.’ Sol, you’re interrupting.”

And I was. “I said *stop!*”

She didn’t like to be yelled at. “Stop exactly what?”

“Enjoying this, for one. And my name never was Edward Smith. And he was never ‘comrade’ Scriabin, he did his thing before the revolution. And Harry Twixt is a superpresh who wouldn’t hold still for rock music if you strapped him to a board. Hey, you don’t think he really is preparing a blast on this, do you?”

“No, but he would if it got around, and he’d say exactly the same thing Smiley said.”

“Him again. You mean about getting to four and sticking there.”

“Right. He said pure Scriabin would send Catalyst right to the

top.”

“What the hell does he know, a newsboy.”

“Yeah, what the hell does he know. Sol—what are you going to do?”

That again. I said, “If Delahanty’s done me that, and he did, and this gets out like you say, and it will, I—I—” I sat down. “I don’t know what the hell I’m going to do.”

With total injustice the Bump (who after all was intensely loyal) said: “I know one damn newsboy ought to mind his own business.” With equal injustice I agreed with her.

And you must not think that at this time the newsboy was any special preoccupation of ours. For that matter neither was Delahanty or Catalyst. We had lots of other troubles. Catalyst wasn’t by any means my only account, and if you know anything at all about woodstocking you know there’s a hell of a lot more to it than a stage and audio towers set in some place they don’t belong, with upwards of a half-million people making themselves locally unwelcome. It begins with things you probably never thought about, like paid whispering campaigns and rumor, and it goes on to advance men and publicity and made-news until it gets to the hard chores of sugaring the heat (twice as bad if it’s overseas)—transport, customs, language, terrain and always, weather. Then there are the hitchhikers—legit ones like the record companies and the parasite press, and the baddies who think how great it is to ship dope and currency in instrument crates. As if that isn’t Station One in any county or narc probe. And the groupies we always have with us. On the surface we beat them back, but there have been times when the performers have been so repulsive I’ve had to *hire* groupies. And oh, the scene, the scene. It’s going to happen to woodstocking like it did to football, I swear, where the half-time shows got so big and glittery they began to run them without a ball game. There’d been woodstocks on a continent of rafts in the Gulf, and in the crater of a rumbling volcano. (Hairy, that one.) A desert, a swamp (three deaths from moccasin bites, that time) and once on four blocks of Second Avenue, with the audience in all the windows and the stage on a temporary bridge on the 54th floor. It cost a lot of money to buy four blocks of Second Avenue for four days. But the scene, the scene ... you had to have a scene. And the more kooky and tilted

the scenes got, the harder it was to find a new one.

I got hung up one night and was working on ways and means and especially ifs in a woodstock to compete with Oberammergau, right on the scene. Anything in that much bad taste would be a big plus presswise, but it generated angles that nobody had ever thought of before. I was thinking of those angles—promotional, religious, political. And whether or not to throw the best talent I had into it, to start arguments on taste, or the worst, which would make a group expendable and very likely expended. And how do you word a contract which lets you out clean if the group is mobbed? And all like that, when someone bleeped the front door.

I complain a lot about working at night but actually I like it. No calls, no visitors, and I can take my spats off. Also I can play whatever I want on the equipment without worrying who might spread the word that I was cornball or too far out or maybe planning to steal some other woodstocker's talent. It is amazing how few people passing by and hearing sounds from a woodstocker's office are capable of thinking just maybe he could be playing something for his own personal kicks.

So when I get barged in on late at night I don't like it much no matter who, and I guess I showed it when I answered the bleep. It was the newsboy. I opened the door and left it open and walked backed to where I was working.

He came in and said, "Got any ice cubes?" And went over to the cooler. I may have sort of waved my hand yes; I don't know. Not that it would've made any difference; I don't think he looked my way. He was a big man, maybe forty-five, with a sour face. "It's flat," he said.

"What's flat?"

"The Liszt."

I thought it sounded pretty good. Also I was annoyed by his not waiting for my ok on the ice and, irrationally, by his having caught me listening to "Les Preludes." "The hell it is."

He put down the ice cube tray and came back, shoving his way through the gate into the inner office and walking back to my display wall, where my antique Sony quadraphonic was playing. He put the back of his middle fingernail against the tape where it passed between the feed wheel and the heads, and pressed upwards. "Brake's dragging," he grunted. "Fix it and the whole

thing will come up in pitch almost a quarter tone.”

“Listen, that machine is—”

“That machine is going to stretch your tape, and it’ll be a long cold summer before you find another like it.”

“What have you got, perfect pitch?”

“Yuh.” He went back to the refrigerator. “Can I take some coffee?”

I glanced up. He was already into my stash of plastic coffee packs, was not waiting for an answer. His whole approach was to scrounge penny-ante things in such a way as to make you a miser if you objected. “What are you going to do about that grave robber?”

“What grave robber?”

“Jomo what’s-his-name.” (As if everybody in the world didn’t know what his name was.) “The Scriabin.”

I hadn’t forgotten about it but I’d been trying. Everybody—well, the Bump—kept asking me what I was going to do. I kept asking me what I was going to do. So I got sore and said it was my business what I was going to do.

“Okay,” he said mildly, and picked up his ice and his coffee—eleven packs, would you believe?—and went to the door. “Do you know when Scriabin was born?” He asked, and left without waiting for an answer.

Did I know when Scriabin was born. Did I care when Scriabin was born. I went back to work on the Oberammergau, with a grumble-grumble going on in the back of my head. I should tell that guy off. I should throw him out. I should wait until he was out and burgle into his place and find out if he really did fry bacon on my bill. I got madder and madder at him for making me mad at me, and began to understand some of the Bump’s tirades about him.

It was all of an hour and a half later that I let myself realize that Scriabin and his date of birth were shoving themselves between me and what I was trying to do. In exasperation I dialed the Library computer and asked.

Christmas Day, 1871.

Big deal. I went back to work, accomplishing not very much except the clear realization that it was too late and I was too tired and that newsboy had cost me again. And eleven packs of coffee to boot. Cursing him, I shut up shop and went home.

It takes me forty minutes to get home, so it was eighty minutes before I got back to the office. I don't think I have ever been so excited in all my life. I started writing do-it memos to stack on the Bump's desk, placed orders, wrote queries, and kept the computer down at the Library humming.

"Well, you're up early!"

I looked up. It was the Bump, and around her was a blue haze from my fatigue, and across her face were little moving speckles—the black spots swimming in front of my eyes. And I felt just wonderful. "No, I'm up late."

"Oh my God." I don't know whether she said that because of the mountain of paper in her do-it stack or because the door opened and in walked Jomo Delahanty. "Well," he said, "you're up early."

"I'm up late," I said again. "Sit down and shut up, Jomo. I want to talk to you. Bump, take a memo. To—"

"Well!" said the newsboy from the door. "You're up early!" He put down the paper and went out.

"No, I'm—Bump! Quit that giggling. And cancel our subscription to that damned paper!"

"We don't have a subscription to that damn paper. He just brings it. He brings it whether I fight with him or not. I hate him a lot. He give you the money this month?"

"Yes, I told you! Jomo—"

"Massacree at Punxsutawney," said Jomo, and began punching the air and snapping his fingers, punch, snap, punch, snap, which he always did when he was talking to you. He never looked at you either, just off into the middle distance, punch, snap, punch, snap. Pop stars. "We killed them dead by the hundreds of thousands." He wore a kilt with a codpiece.

"I know what you did at Punxsutawney. You barely scored enough to cover the bribes, with enough left over to buy a peanut for the groundhog."

"You always sweet talk me, Solly boy." He closed his eyes, showed his teeth, and went punch, snap.

The Bump said, "What are you going to do about—"

"Shut up, Bump. I got to have words with this, uh, talent. You know where you are on the charts?"

"Four." Punch, snap.

"And you know where you were last week? And the week

before? And the week before that?"

"That's show biz." Punch, snap.

"I'll tell you what's showbiz. It's great to be in the top ten but four is special. Up from four and you're a winner. Down from four is *out*, man. You don't slide, you fall right off. Well maybe number eight, nine for a week, but then goodbye."

"I got a new cut that'll—"

"You got 'Metaphysical Mope' that'll keep you right where you're at for maybe two more weeks. The other thing special about number four is that the longer you stay there the surer it is that you'll fall right off. If you even get to three for a week you might have a chance, but every time you score that four after four, you're closer to the final edge."

"He's right," said the Bump, which is, I think, the first time she ever said such a thing in my hearing.

Punch, snap, punch, snap. "Well don't you fret Solly boy. I got a trick up my sleeve, something new, something different. I got a whole new sound, whole new trend." Punch, snap, and the closed eyes and the teeth, the bit that always made the split-tails scream. He opened his eyes and looked right at me for a change. "And I am not just jammin' a loose riff. I hit that stride a while back and it paid off, and I never went on with it. Now I will. Okay?"

"You mean you're going to stop stealing from Scriabin and go back to robbing Dvorak?"

No punch.

No snap.

From the corner of my eye I saw the Bump slowly, slowly sitting down. I think she had to. Jomo Delahanty sprawled where he was, speared and bleeding and glassy-eyed. Sometimes it's a shame to catch a man so dead to rights. Sometimes it does a lot more harm than good. You got to leave the man a place to stand.

He said, "How did you know?"

"Did you take me for a musical ignoramus?"

"Yes."

I heard suppressed laughter make a scratchy noise in the Bump's sinuses. I hoped it hurt.

"What you want me to do?" asked Jomo. (Jomo!)

"Go on doing what you're doing," I said. "It's great. The only thing wrong with the Scriabin you've been doing is Jomo Delahanty. Give us less of that and more of the real thing. Of

course, double the beat and fuzz the sides, and fool around like that all you want, but keep the Scriabin clean.”

“They’ll ... find out. They’ll know!”

“Sure they’ll know.... When was Scriabin born?”

“Long time back.”

“Christmas 1871,” said the Bump, looking at my notes.

“Christmas, 1871. Next year, two hundred even. Right?”

Behind me I heard the Bump, in an awed whisper, begin reverently to recite the names of the top deities from three religions. I said, “You are going to ram hot clean Scriabin clear up to the top of the charts for a whole year, and when the news leaks out it will be countered with a prepared campaign and the biggest woodstock ever seen, for the Scriabin Second Centenary, and the fans’ll be locked in, and the snobs’ll love you for the greatest rediscovery since Mendelssohn plugged J.S. Bach.”

“How did you know that story, Sol?” asked the Bump. “I took you for a musical ig—”

“Shut up, Bump. Now you listen, Jomo. Scriabin wrote—hand me that note, Bump—no, *that* one.... Scriabin wrote five symphonies, more or less, ten sonatas, and a whole bunch of orchestral poems and preludes. There ought to be enough there for you to keep your sticky fingers busy for that year. I want more Scriabin, less Delahanty, and lyrics.”

“Yuh, yuh, what?”

“Lyrics.”

“You mean words? *Words*, to neo-rock? Aw man, nobody writes words no more, except folk, and I don’t do folk. Nobody’s wrote words for forty years, man. I mean an antique dealer I may be, but camp I am not. They used to do that, but more and more the music crowded in, and more and more the words fuzzed down, and everybody likes it the way it is, you listen and feel, man, and you don’t screw it up with ‘wha he say, wha he say?’ ”

“You trust this nose, and Jomo, and do like I said.”

Jomo stirred himself up from three-quarters horizontal to a forty-degree list, which was his code for standing up for his rights. “And if I don’t?”

“Think about it,” I said. I let him think about it for a minute. I let him think about the clause in his contract which called for original compositions, and I let him think about the public announcement that he’d stolen everything he ever wrote. I could

see him thinking about “the biggest woodstock ever seen,” too. All this thinking got kind of heavy and he slowly slumped under the weight until he was backed to supine. And I had him.

“But I can’t write lyrics,” he moaned. (“Either,” I heard the Bump murmur.) And he had me.

There was a painful silence for a while and then Jomo stirred. He sat up and punched a couple of times, though he couldn’t cheer himself up enough to snap. “I guess you get words the same way you get music,” he said.

I shared a sick look with the Bump and then told Jomo to go round up the group. “I’ll release ‘Metaphysical Mope,’ ” I said, “and by this time tomorrow I want a call from you telling me you cut tracks on some new Scriabin—your choice—and a draft of some lyrics.”

“Ain’t going to like this,” said Jomo, getting up. “I ain’t, they ain’t, and them out there neither.” He left.

“It doesn’t scan and it doesn’t parse, but it do communicate,” the Bump observed, and “Sometimes you do genius things, Sol.”

“Well, thanks.”

“Statistical necessity,” said my valued employee. “You do so many things, so sooner or later—”

“Soon as you get to work.” I pointed at her do-it stack, wondering when I could get a compliment without a sting in its tail.

The Bump had a hell of a fight with the newsboy. I concede that I got the story from her, and you might think it is slanted her way, and it probably was—but not much. Though she has an ego the size of Mount Washington, the Bump has honesty like the Alps.

“I Love Maple Walnut”

Ejler Edgar Aylmer (nobody has a name like Ejler Edgar Aylmer, not any more) once showed me a computerized butler he invented. I’d visited his basement workshop while he was having his lunch, and he said, “I want some mustard.” Before I could finish saying, “Sure, where ...” the far wall made a noise like hawking in the antriums, and a great long pantograph sort of thing came whizzing across the room and smacked a jar of chilled Dijon into his open palm, retracting into the wall with a crisp ptui.

“What was that, Ejler Edgar?”

“Butler,” said the inventor. “Of course, that’s an understatement. I’m not about to tell you its real name. I told somebody else the other day, and the consequences were not—ah ...”

“You can tell me.”

“Well then, just between you and me and the far wall, I call it Cupid.”

“An acronym.”

“Not an acronym. Cupid is Cupid because nobody really understands how he works. Also, Cupid always did have a way of giving people what they deserved when what they asked for was their heart’s desire. Also there was always something cold-blooded about Cupid with his blindfold and his random shots. Cupid—this one here—is after all a computer, recording all available data, sieving it through the command, and dropping the result out of the chute—in this case, fulfilling the demand.”

“It can give you anything? *Anything?*”

“Certainly. Doesn’t everybody believe that of Cupid? You get what you want, based on every scrap of data that Cupid can discover about you. No matter what.” And he made a peculiar laugh.

“Ejler Edgar, you better tell me why you made that peculiar laugh. I won’t tell as long as we both shall live.”

And I think all along he really wanted to tell me. “It was that

other idiot” (I think that was how he phrased it) “who used to come barging in here at lunchtime. Dendium, his name was, Potiphar Ungwall Dendium, a lubricious type with a pornographic wink and a chuckle out of his right molars. Used to gobble his lunch at Greasy’s and get his dessert to go—gooey puddings and sloppy sundaes, leave the empty containers around the basement for me to clean up. Wormed the name Cupid out of me, found out Cupid could deliver anything—*anything*. Challenged me to prove it. So I said, ‘Go ahead, ask.’ So he said, ‘You know what I want, Cupid. and I want it at home in bed waiting for me.’ He launched one of those winks, and I swear the man’s eyelashes smelled of musk.

“Back he comes the next day, really, doesn’t begin to be lunchtime, screaming at me. Called me a dammit. ‘Dammit,’ he screams, ‘frigidity I can deal with, but this is ridiculous. You and your dammit dammit butler ...’ ”

“Dammit?”

“You are very young,” said Ejler Edgar gently. “I am substituting. ‘Your dammit butler put me to bed with an ice cream cone!’ Then he called me a dammit and stormed out.”

“But why? I mean, *why*?”

“Because Cupid can only act on the data he gets. Maybe that’s what the blindfold means. And because the word love is so rich in meanings and so poor in distinctions between those meanings, Cupid gave him love as he himself defined it, one of the times he was here.”

“Defined it how?”

“I won’t tell you,” said Ejler Edgar. I guess I looked pretty stricken because he said, “but I’ll write it.”

“Write it where?”

“Why, up there at the top of your story,” said Ejler Edgar Aylmer, may he rest easy wherever he may be.

Blue Butter

Not having heard anything in so long, I went over to his lab and banged: *bip-bip. bam bam*. “Hey, come in,” came Stromberg’s voice, and it called my name.

Thirty-eight years I’ve known Stromberg, and that instant recognition of my knock, that immediate *Hey, come in!* are things I am very, very proud of. I never knew how I earned them. I learned from a third party one time that he liked having me around because he could talk with me about anything, anything at all, all the things that kept that great big brain of his seething along the way it did: physics, chemistry, art, music, electronics, poetry, food, love, politics, philosophy, humor. The third party had it, wrong. He could talk to me about things. Not with. Nobody could talk with him about those things. Not all those things.

So in I came and through the dark front office to the lab with its rows of Miller flasks, with the hoods, the beautiful bewilder of crystal plumbing, the computer array with its visual mutter of indicator lights and readouts, red and orange and off-white to green, the huge pegboard over the electronics bench with its racks of tools and shiny black boxes and bundles of test leads like parades of trained baby snakes with chromium jaws. Through an inner door I could see something of the chemistry and bio lab, where, if the readouts muttered in lights, the gleam of glass was a complex whisper. Around the back wall, where I could not now see it, I knew there were cages and surgical instruments, a scrubbing sink with treadle-controlled valves, a stainless steel vet’s examining table, microscopes, microtomes, two centrifuges, a sterilizer and a sink. Two entire walls, right to the ceiling, were glass-fronted cabinets of chemicals. Through a further door was, I knew, a library with its own computer terminal for instant retrieval of book locations and to tap into outside sources.

The main laboratory, where I stood just inside, was lit only by a wash of yellow light from the open door of the little room in which Stromberg kept nothing but his cot and his coffee, and a

dazzling cone of “daylight” fluorescence from a point in the ceiling. On a low stool in the center of this disc of light sat Stromberg, half dressed—the top half—with his legs spraddled out due south and due west respectively, anointing his pubic area heavily with a thick blue-gray paste. He flashed me a smile, said “Nothing alarming,” and went on with his work.

I had nothing to say and so said it while he finished what he was doing. He then wiped his fingers with a succession of tissues, replaced the cover on the jar of paste, placed a series of gauze pads on the affected area, where they stuck enthusiastically, and rose. I followed him into the cot-and-coffee room. “I needn’t have said that,” Stromberg grinned, “about being alarmed. Not to you. You have that virtue—did anyone ever tell you? You seem to be completely accepting. You’re not judgmental. You don’t apply moral and social yardsticks to what people do. You just take it in and you wait. That’s kind of nice.” He went into the little bathroom in the corner and washed his hands busily, like a surgeon. “Make coffee.”

It was made. I fixed mine, honey and milk, and his, black, in big ceramic cups. I could have corrected his accolade. I have as many prejudices, make as many moral evaluations as the next man, and more than some. What Stromberg was not in a position to know was that I did not, would not, could not apply any of them to him, and never had. Just for an immediate example, when he came out of the bathroom wearing only a polo shirt, with his masculine apostrophe protruding from a nest of stuck-on white gauze slowly staining grey, it could not be called ludicrous. Stromberg was never ludicrous. Not to me.

He slid a drawer out of the wall and removed a pair of white boxer shorts and a disposable white coverall. He put them on and slid his feet into throwaway slippers, took from another drawer a large plastic bag, banged it open, and handed it to me. He stripped the cot completely, rolling up the foam mattress, sheets and blanket, and while I held the bag open, manhandled the whole bundle inside. He twisted the top closed, padded out to the office, and came back with a big bright tag reading CONTAMINATED. “Go wash your hands,” he said, dragging the bag off toward the outer door. “Nothing lethal,” he reassured me as I went into the bathroom.

In the bathroom were graffiti. Not many.

NOTHING IS ALWAYS ABSOLUTELY SO.

“ $E = MC^2$ MAY AFTER ALL BE A LOCAL PHENOMENON.”

—ALBERT EINSTEIN

“ANY ANSWER IS NOT NECESSARILY THE ONLY ANSWER.”

—CHARLES FORT

—and, surprisingly

YOU BLOW MY MIND

AND

I’LL SUCK YOURS

“Joey broke his thumb,” I said, coming out of the bathroom.

“Broke? How? When? On what? Is it—”

I put out my hands placatingly. Stromberg can talk at you sometimes like over a gunshot. “Clean break, simple fracture, three weeks ago, no complications. Stuck his thumb through the spokes of the pulley on his gemstone tumbler.”

“Why isn’t there a guard on it?”

“There is a guard on it. He opened it up to show another kid why there was a guard on it.”

Tension flowed out of his shoulders and neck and tugged at the corners of his mouth as it went away. He held up his left hand, wiggled the little finger. Flexed, it was a little out of line at the second joint. Never noticed that before. “Did the exact same thing when I was his age,” he said. “How about that.... How’s Curie?”

“Perfect. Just beginning to find out that being a girl’s not the same as being a kid.”

He liked that. I’d known he would. He twinkled at me and gently gibed, “Incipient chauvinism?”

“Mine, not hers. Never hers.”

We went into the main lab where he picked up the ointment and tissues he had left on the floor by the stool. Tidy man. He asked it, finally; he had to:

“Mitty?”

“Just fine. Just fine. Took the kids to Arrowhead for a week. Got a new green cape.”

“Look, is she happy?”

I had to wait a bit to answer that. “Happier,” I said carefully. “That figures.” He nodded, and then nodded again. “No place to go but up. I—I’ll drop around soon, see them.”

“Good idea.”

He shot me a special look of his. It makes you blink when he does that. Lasers don't need gunsights. "You see them a lot."

"Mm." Almost every day, a lot of nights, but there was no need to say it.

"That's good." He was still a moment, then made a characteristic gesture of his, raising his hands, letting them fall to slap his thighs. Change of subject. He went to the office doorway and hit the wall-switches. Hooded lights over the far benches winked on, and the aching cone from the ceiling went out. It was a lot pleasanter that way.

"Everything's a part of everything anyway," he said.

"Who said that?" For I knew it was a quote.

"The singer Donovan. Also the *I Ching*, the joss sticks, divination by sheep's guts, and me."

"Okay." Then I waited.

" 'To measure a circle, begin anywhere.' "

I knew who that was. That was Charles Fort.

He finally found a place to begin. And he was right; he could have begun anywhere. I knew this man, I'd been with him in this mood before. It drove some people past all patience, the way he moved from one thing to another, however authoritatively; they wanted a neat title for it all, like the label on a jar of ointment, letting you know ahead of time what was inside what it was made of, what it was for. With Stromberg, you had to wait while he made a brick, set it aside, wait while he cut a beam, set it aside, wait while he forged nails and roofing tar and conduit and sash. When he was done it would be a structure; you could trust him for that.

"Some people," he said, "are gifted—maybe it's 'afflicted' with a different time scale from other people. They don't think in biographical time—I mean, my era, things since I was born, or in historical time, the miserable tick of time—" he snapped his fingers "—since we began to write our adventures and our lies about our adventures. They think in geological time, in astronomical time, in cosmological time. I'm talking about the idiots who involve themselves in science fiction, reading it, writing it. Some scientists. Some philosophers."

"Some mystics." I shouldn't have interrupted. I do know better. But he almost conceded the point.

"Maybe so. Maybe, though I tend to think that a lot of them,

and a lot of composers and artists and the more broad-spectrum theologians, take off at right angles to what I see as the linearity of things, the progress from cause to effect. I dunno. Maybe that gives them a perspective as important as, cosmological-time thinking. I dunno. I dunno. They're not mutually exclusive. Room for everyone. It's a 'big universe.'

We sat down. Stromberg literally, one hunker at a time, sat on his hands. "Trying like hell not to scratch," he explained. "Anyway, people with a mental set like that are regarded as something less than human. Cold. Uncaring, lacking in something ... it isn't like that. It isn't. It's just that marriage contracts and chivalry and whether or not you report to church or carry the clan bone through your nose, these things can't weigh too heavily in the presence of continental drift and the birth and death of stars. You can love her and rub her feet and try to get tickets for the opening, to make her happy, but what do you do with the recognition that she, and you, and all your works and thoughts, are trivialities? Especially when you can't say it to her. Never. Never."

"Oh."

He shot me a look. "I think I heard a light go on."

"You did. I never really knew before. More—*she* never knew, doesn't know. She thinks she failed you in some way. She takes it hard, the papers: NOBEL LAUREATE AT RACE TRACK. Dr. Stromberg seen in Hollywood in the company of. Dr. Stromberg in temporary custody after waterfront brawl. She thinks she did all that, some way."

"Well, she didn't." He waved his hand at the computer wall. "That did. The big extrapolation. Hey, I held your head through something once. Your kid sister."

I nodded. It still knotted my stomach. "Ran through a plate-glass door. Face, hands, arms, legs. Squirting twenty jets of blood."

"Horrible," he agreed. "But after the initial emergency was over and they had her put together again and on the way back, what was driving you right off the track?"

I remembered. " 'What did she do to deserve this?' "

"Right. And I was able to tell you that 'right' and 'wrong' and 'deserve' belong to some other scale, some other country, language, some other set than the cause-and-effect sequentiality

that resulted in all that virgin's blood."

"It helped."

"Sure it did. Unfortunately, there's no way to pour the same balm on my wife without insulting her."

I said, very carefully, "It was very sudden. One day, a set-in-his ways family man. The next, lawyers' and bankers' letters, a huge settlement, and the day after, the headlines begin. It's too easy to assign it to some middle-aged itch, the pursuit of vanishing youth. Something happened."

He nodded, and rapped his head, replacing the hand under his right buttock. "The whole thing was there, had been for a long time. But on that day the lights went on for *me*." Again he nodded at the computers.

I just waited until he came to some internal decision and began to speak. "Listen:

She wounds you, as a rose will wound, Not always, as expected, with its thorn. A rose will always wound you with its rose.

"Gooseflesh."

"Gooseflesh. Right. Harry Martinson, a Swede wrote it. Gooseflesh for Bach's "Passacaglia and Fugue in C Minor," for the last movement of *Beethoven's 9th*, for a sailplane, for Nureyev, for Gagarin who, said, "I am an eagle." Gooseflesh for the groining of a Gothic cathedral and for Ellington and for Dylan Thomas. Gooseflesh, if you like, for *pons asinorum* and the little fingernail of your first child. But by what towering arrogance do we attach any importance or permanence, to any of these things? Importance to us, whose things they are, of course naturally. But to a *louse*? What does human transcendence have to do with a louse, except that it might make a single human sit a little stiller to be bitten?

"And by what towering conceit do we assume that a louse has not its own Shakespeares and Mozarts? No one ever thought of that—not ever. We will tolerate a louse by not thinking about it, sometimes by not believing it exists, but when we become aware, we smother it with blue butter, never dreaming or caring that all the lice might be sharing the equivalent, to lice, of 'A rose-red city, half as old as time.' "

He leaned forward and spoke with a terrible intensity. "All right, I'll tell you what I saw when the lights went on, when the computer read me out the final extrapolation. We are all lice on

the earth, life living off life, down to the bacteria which live off the substance of the earth itself. And up to now the earth hasn't known nor cared. Now it knows, now it cares. Not as a conscious entity, of course; I'm not giving you the *When the Earth Screamed* kind of poppycock. Linear causation: the rare accident of our atmosphere and its special orchestration of components produced life, and now life has made itself manifest enough to upset the balance."

"Ecologically—" I began to say.

"Damn it, I'm not giving you more of that popular and fashionable drone about ecology and conservation. There is no conservation that will do any good; we're on the slide. The death of the oceans and the loss of a breathable atmosphere are not the end of the world—the world, per se, is not going to end, not for billions of years more.

"Earth has always, in its numb passive way, fought us back. The struggle for existence, for life, has always been a struggle because by its nature earth didn't want us. Like us with the lice, we can live with them until we itch. Well, we've itched the earth and when we didn't respond to a scratch or two, to a plague or a quake, then time came for the blue butter.

"We're going back now, all the way to methane and ammonia, hydrogen sulfide, water vapor and hydrogen for an atmosphere, back to the fifty-year rains and a land unprotected by an ozone layer. It won't be exactly the primordial atmosphere, but something very like it, at least as far as terrestrial life is concerned. It won't be a triviality like another Ice Age. It'll be clear back to before-the-beginning.

"*It will be.* I am not fantasizing, I am not guessing. It will be so.

"So learning that, I looked at myself—fifty-one years old, faithful, reliable, a good credit risk. Never drank, fought, gambled, picked up a woman at a bar, never skated, skied, never ate haggis or kous-kous. So now I am going to live till I die, I am going to feel, I am going to be. I have money and so far, my health, and I am by God going to use them!"

For some time I couldn't speak. When I could, I nodded at the computers and asked, "Then there's really no hope?"

He laughed out loud. "Hope? Of course there's hope! By its very nature, Earth is doomed to have parasites!" He freed one hand and patted his crotch. "During that deluge of mercurial

ointment—an old-fashioned remedy but a good one—among the death-cries of the crab civilization I heard the voice of one old louse-philosopher, who said, ‘Have hope, my friends, have hope, he is but preparing the ground for another dose of crabs.’ I’m quite certain that he was right, and I do hope for the future of lousedom that the new clean environment produces a crab that does not itch.”

I got up then and left, and went to find Mrs. Stromberg and, if I could, tell her why.

The Singsong of Cecily Snow

“Mesmer-Eyes” he called her in the moonlight; in the meantime he was walking with her westerly to her inner wailing wall. A gross, uncaring bastard was this Bulbul Byo, blessed with silver speech and graceful gait and the manners of a tutor to the tutors of a household royal. His score so far was 66 successful satisfactory seductions, 37 shattered lives, six suicides, and fourteen thousand nights of bitter tears. His road ahead was paved with promises; behind him he left loneliness and puzzlement and greying disappointment—seldom anger, never vengeance. “Mesmer-Eyes,” he whispered, “you can drain me with a glance, I am weakened by your touch, I have no defense if you command me.” Watchfully, he spoke to her, proclaiming weakness as she weakened, acting melted as he touched her, humbled as he humbled her—his special trick, this artful knack of taking on himself the outward signs of this or that effect that he evoked in her. To make a woman want him he would want her with his words and hands; to make her cry, he cried; to make her yield, he said, “I yield.”

It worked. It always worked.

The target tonight was young Cecily—sunny and svelte and a cynosure, making the marketplace more than a mall for mere merchandise. Moonmarket Village (not really its name, but known so because of the region’s tradition of holding its market day, sun-up to midnight each full-of-the-moon) lay in the lake country east of the Wamberly Waters. Who is to say that the Moonmarket merriment, the sweet, mellow madness of Moonmarket Day, was caused by the magic of full-of-the-moon, or simply to celebrate its high soaring silver? Nobody questioned it, nobody wondered why rain never fell on the laughter and lanterns of Moonmarket, nor why the wind whispered then, sweeping sweet smoke from the barbecue stalls and fanning the flower carts, caring for colorful kites and delaying the dancing of dust till the following day. Likewise the matter of Cecily, golden

and swift, her laughter a spatter of birdsong, her adroitness in helping with tent pegs or tea baskets, her instant and total attention to troubles and children; why no one wondered where Cecily went when the market was over, nor how many markets, for how many moons, was Cecily central to Moonmarket time. She was, that is all, that is it; and a far greater mystery, greater than moons or a biddable wind, was that nobody wondered, nobody questioned, nobody traced the incredible Cecily Snow.

Bulbul Byo in a dusty cloak, with a hunting set to his wide-spaced eyes and plumes to sweep from his glossy head and a twist of glands where his heart should be and a tidal voice which could drown girls' doubts, swung down from the hills to the marketplace when the moon was full and the late sun paused on the wooded crests. The village, framed by its yielding fields with its outer border of wilderness and the distant lake with its green and blue and its scarf of orange from the setting sun, and the call of hucksters and the fiddles' cry were enough to halt any normal soul for a draught of joy. Bulbul's care was for none of this, for he saw the sun on long black hair and the swirl of skirts and slender arms, and the fit of bodices that curved his hands; and his glands beat strong and his pointed tongue flicked the pointed tip of his upper lip and he took a step and he froze.

For then he saw Cecily, Cecily Snow, flickering down and across the invisible lines that the dance-caller wove on the Moonmarket green, tilting to this man and whirling with that, and allemande left, and now-swing-your-own. Bulbul, a moment ago, had the choice of a hundred and looked to the pleasure of choosing; but one glimpse of Cecily settled the matter. One deep breath through wide flared nostrils, legs come alive again, eyes blurring slightly through a mist of lust, Bulbul strode to the village street and along to the green and around to the place with the music played. And he waited.

And the music bleated and bubbled and came to a halt, and Cecily spun gasping and smiling away from the dancers as the sets turned turmoil, and found herself caught by the elbow and speared by the gaze of the man in the cloak, who swept down his plumes and announced that he found her at last.

"I do not know you, sir," she said, "and I am not lost."

"I am Bulbul Byo." His throaty voice seemed aimed at the pores rather than the ears; it soaked the skin entire, to its most intimate

reaches. "I came over the mountains and across the moors, seeing the loom of a light like that of the unrisen moon, and thirsting to know its source; and it led me to you. Now you know me and how I came to be here."

"But not why," she responded.

"To give you gifts," he answered immediately, and gave her a little gold locket he acquired two towns ago by saying to a woman that he did not want it. He had given it away one town ago, and had gotten it back by saying how he admired any lady who could treasure memory more than a material thing. She took it and cupped it in one hand while the fingers of the other drifted over its small bright surface looking not at it, but at him. He felt a twinge of alarm, but kept it out of his voice. "What are you doing?" he asked, surprising himself.

"Looking at you," she replied.

"I mean, with the locket."

"Looking at you," she said; and at that, he should have known, but he did not. She asked him then what other gifts he had in mind, which was what he wanted to hear. He bowed slightly and offered his arm, which she took, and they toured the market, where he bought her a sausage and a cider.

"And now I have a thing unique and precious for you," he said, and he said it leaning forward, taking her shoulders, placing his mouth by her neck, warming it, putting his words up under the fall of her hair. "But I have it hidden yonder, and we shall have to walk."

"Yonder? To the west? But there is nothing there but the wood, and Wamberly Waters."

"But there is. Come. We have the moon to help us."

"Yes," she said. "Indeed the moon will help us." Arm in arm they walked away westerly, whether or not to her wailing wall he could not care, and she simply did not. "Tell me: what are you?" And he answered her easily: traveler, trader, tutor, teller of tales; cavalier, courtier, captain of calvary, artist and artisan, poet-philosopher. "My," she said. "My!"

And into the fringes, moon-flecked and bright, of Wamberly Wood, and into the thickening growth with more shadows than light, and into the heart of the dark of the woodland they walked, when he sighed and they stopped.

“What is it?”

“Forgive me; you’ve worked at the market all day, you were dancing for half of the night, you are weary. I know by my own weariness, pressing toward you day after day, and you must forgive me.” He opened the clasp of his cloak and spread it on the moss and sank down on it, holding out his hands. “I must rest, and so must you.”

“Perhaps I must,” said Cecily. “You’ve a weary-making way of saying *weary*,” and she took his hands and nestled them beside him.

“The dark has not brought cool,” he said weakly. “I find it hard to breathe,” and he unhooked the loops of his silken shirt.

“I, too, find it difficult...” she whispered.

“I can barely move, but I shall help you,” and he unlaced her bodice. She made no move to stop him. But as each lace was loosed, she murmured a thing he had told her about himself: traveler, trader, tutor, teller of tales; cavalier, courtier, captain of cavalry, artist and artisan, poet-philosopher; and as the last lace fell away, she asked him, “Are you also a liar?”

“Certainly not!” he cried, startled. “I speak only the truth!”

“Then sobeit,” she said; and, reaching into a stray thread of moonlight, she filled her cupped hands with it like a fluid, and poured it over his head.

For the second time he demanded, “What are you doing?” and she answered, “Making of you a teller of truth.”

“I have told you the truth!” he protested. “I have sought you, I have found you, I have become your servant and your slave!”

“Precisely,” said Cecily. “Know then that I am the Moon Witch of the market village, and that the likes of what you were are not tolerated, and what you now are can be useful; for now, anything you say will then become the truth, since getting you to tell the truth in any other way is beyond your ability or mine.”

“I will never leave you!” he cried.

“Oh damn,” said Cecily, “I do wish you hadn’t said that. Let me think a minute.”

He waited slavishly for a moment and then she rose and held out her hand. “Come with me.” And she led him through the wood to the shore of the Wamberly Waters.

Moored there was a little boat. She ordered him into it and,

opening the little gold locket, she handed it to him, saying, "Your first condition is that of my servant and my slave, and as such you must finish the task I set you before you begin to be my constant companion. Therefore, I order you to take this locket as your spoon and with it lift all of the water from one side of the boat and put it all on the other side." So saying she bent and took the prow of the boat and mightily launched it far out into the Wamberly Waters; then turned and walked into the wood, lacing up her bodice and thinking good thoughts.

And so it is, if you ever cross the mountains and the rich fields of the lake country, and at the full of the moon, come upon a village with a Moonmarket, and go on through the forest to the lake shore, you will see an old, old man in a boat, dipping and spilling, dipping and spilling, while back in the village the dancers dance and the hawkers cry their wares, and central to it all is the beautiful Cecily Snow. None of which is a mystery, not when compared to the mystery that nobody ever questions, nobody ever wonders, about Cecily, Cecily, Cecily Snow.

Harry's Note

The most exciting thing that ever happened to Harry (aside from rheumatic fever and Susan) was the evening he spent with Timothy Leary. After that—well, you'll judge for yourself, but before, things had been pretty quiet for Harry.

Dr. Leary came swinging into Woodstock, New York, bringing with him two younger men, Metzner and Alpert, with shiny shoes, pants with creases, and sharing a professorial, rather humorless air. They reminded Harry of divinity students, senior grade: earnest, intense, illuminated. But Leary, the leonine head just grizzling, straight-spined, quick-minded, with his charisma and his resonant voice; Leary was something else again.

He used words like "psychotomimetic" and a brand-new one, "psychedelic," and fielded questions like "If I knocked and the door was opened by a man who had taken LSD, what would you look like?" and "Is it addictive?" openly and immediately, all of which interested Harry quite a lot, but it wasn't until afterward, at the Café Espresso across the street, that Harry achieved that highest-yet peak of excitement.

Over cappuccino, Dr. Leary held forth about mutations. "There are three kinds of mutations," said Leary. "Lethal ones, and you can mostly forget about them. They cause stillbirths, and when they don't, the young seldom survive, and when they do, they seldom reproduce—they're mules, they just don't live long enough to mate. Then there is the beneficial mutation—say in a herd animal, when one is born with longer and stronger hind legs. This one gets away from the predators better than any of the others, and passes the strain on. The descendants thrive, and in a few, or a few dozen generations, you'll find a whole herd with the new legs.

"But there's a third kind of mutation. It's the one that just means nothing—nothing at all. Suppose, in our herd animal, one is born with mottled skin—black and pink, when all-pink has been the rule. This coloration is under the hair, invisible unless you bring a razor and shaving cream on your safari, and it doesn't

make any difference. It doesn't affect speed or strength or diet or anything else; there's no selective breeding for it because there just isn't anything to select. Well, in three generations, or three hundred, or three thousand—a very short time, as such things go—the mottled characteristic will dilute and die out, and, in all probability, never appear again. Why should it?

"All right," he went on, "all the evidence is that the new brain, the grey brain with its temporal lobes, was an explosive mutation and in terms of the species it was a beneficial one. Humanity isn't the first animal to perform concerted actions, or to build elaborate structures, or to use tools; it's a matter of degree. Mankind was able to do these things better, that's all—a great deal better, and more of 'em. It wasn't the first to achieve communication with its own kind, either, but again, it did it better than any competitor, and did it with a very large plus: the ability to transmit knowledge not only to contemporaries, but down through the generations. I mean, each tribe didn't have to discover fire over and over again, or the arch, or the wheel, or Einstein's general field theory. The height of knowledge we have now reached (whatever *that* is) we reached by standing on the shoulders of those who gone before us, and who were able to communicate it to us."

Harry pointed to Leary's empty cup, Leary nodded that big fine head, Harry beckoned the waiter and pointed again, all very swift and efficient, without Dr. Leary's having to break his conversational stride. It pleased Harry. Communication. Oh indeed, humanity has come a long way.

"Beneficial mutation, right?" Leary demanded, and immediately, "Wrong! Wrong, because every single one of those survival, progressive miracles can be performed with only a fraction of the brain! Will you take my word for that, or you want the documentation? Because believe me friend, I have it: case histories of ninety percent recovery of function in people with half their brains removed, papers on stereotaxia—electrical stimulation of discrete parts of both the forebrain and the old, old white brain under it, and documentation coming in daily in dozen lots of psychedelic experience ... but I covered that in my lecture, and you don't want to hear all that over again. No—I'm here to tell you that the explosive mutation produced more than the capabilities we are so proud of—much more. I don't know

how many times it has been said, by how many people, that we only use a fraction of the forebrain; some say a tenth, some say a third, some say two thirds, but I'm not going to get mired in argument over percentages. I'm simply stating a well-known and proven fact in biology: that if a living thing, plant or animal, has a limb or organ tied off or immobilized, that limb or organ, be it leaf or thyroid or good right arm is going to atrophy, drop off, die and rot, or what have you. And the same thing happens on a larger scale, in the case of that Class Three mutation is initially neither lethal nor beneficial."

With tremendous slow emphasis, drawing all of that charisma into a tight beam and aiming it into Harry's eyes, he said, "Unless we discover the function of that unused portion of the brain, then, just like the mottling of the skin under the hair of the animal I mentioned, that part of the brain will atrophy, wither away, dilute, disappear in thirty, three hundred, three thousand generations—a tick of time in the history of the species—never to be seen again in all the universe. Never!" And he struck the table so hard that the sugar bowl jumped, and so did Harry, and the waiter was afraid for a moment to put down the cappuccino. "Find it, use it," said Leary. "Use it or lose it. Use it or lose it." Harry thought he had tears in his eyes. He couldn't know, for the tears in his own.

It was the saddest story ever heard. The towering, monumental, mountainous sadness of the concept—humanity having had, and having lost this unknown potential, while keeping, while building on, the part of itself it had already used—it was more than Harry could bear. It was infinitely more tragic than the idea of the total death of humanity. And—what would a future humanity be like, without that mysterious potentiality? Would it go on building bigger skyscrapers, bombs, frustrations and alienations? Would it become cookie-cutter repetitive, with nothing left of its deepest humanness but flickering urges and unidentifiable images? Who could know, without knowing the nature of the thing that was lost?

He never could remember the rest of the evening; he never really tried, though because of it he understood far better than the general public what it was that drove Timothy Leary to do what he did, to become famous and then infamous and then well on the road to fame again; and he understood that it was the

same thing that drove Metzner to seek his measure of the problem his own way, and Alpert, who became Baba Ram Dass, in yet another. But this was not their story.

The reason that this encounter had such an impact on Harry is that he was, by some quirk of nature, a sadness freak—a collector of sadnesses. Like the intergenerational growth of information, Harry's sadnesses stood on the shoulders of sadnesses gone by. When the guys got together in college to slurp beer and tell dirty stories all night, Harry never told dirty stories, he told sad stories, like the one about the man making love to his wife who went on and on for an hour and a quarter before he was finished, and his wife said, "Gosh, honey, what took you so long?" And he answered, "Well, I couldn't think of anybody."

And the one he picked up in England, about the cheery warm pub, and a thin little girl came in and out of the freezing fog, all big eyes and little frayed coat. She sidles round to the bar and the cheery warm bartender says, "Wot'll you 'ave?" and she says, "'Ow much is arf-pint o' bitter?" and he says, "Tuppence," and she says "Orl roight," and he fills this little bitty glass while she dumps her purse on the bar. She starts to pick up the glass and he grabs a wrist like a chicken-foot and presses it back down. "Wite a minute, 'old on there," he says, "Yon's a penny and a button." She puts her knuckles to her mouth and her eyes got bigger than ever. "Ow," she says, "Oi've been 'ad fer a button!"

A few like that and the guys would throw empty beer cans at Harry and tell him to go home.

Harry cherished the true story of Humboldt and the parrot. Humboldt was the 19th century German explorer for whom the Humboldt Currents are named, and Humboldt County in California. Deep in the rainforest in Brazil he encountered an Indian tribe; and in a village they had a talking parrot. But this parrot did not speak the language of this tribe; it came from another tribe, even deeper into the Matto Grosso, and this second tribe was extinct. This parrot was the only living thing on earth that spoke the language of that dead tribe; and it was only a parrot.

This was the shining central jewel in Harry's sadness collection until that night at the Espresso. Though he never remembered the rest of the evening there, he did remember going to Susan

afterward. She held him for a long time—not because she understood what was tearing him apart, because she didn't, but probably because she had never seen him cry before.

Harry might have been able to live with it if it hadn't been for the Man from Mars. No, that doesn't sound right; it sounds like blame. There wasn't anyone to blame, really, except maybe Harry himself, being what he was.

It isn't easy to describe what happened that evening when the Man from Mars first talked to Harry. Correction again. Someone once said about Einstein's Theory of Relativity: it isn't difficult to understand; it's just impossible to believe. All right? This is what happened:

First of all, the Man from Mars wasn't a man and he wasn't from Mars. "The Man from Mars" is what Harry first called him, half kidding, half abjectly terrified, and since he never had another name for him, he stuck with "Man from Mars" though they both knew it was inaccurate. Second, the Man from Mars did something—Harry never knew what—that eliminated the terror completely. Finally, although he wasn't invisible, Harry never saw him, and even when the Man pointed at something on a printed page or on one of the sketches or drawings or charts he asked Harry to make from time to time, Harry could never if his life depended on it describe what the hand (if it was a hand) or the finger (if it was a finger) looked like. It was as if something diverted his attention every time he started to look at the Man. Yet the presence was very strong, very solid, very real. Well, it's not all that strange, when you come to think of it. A normal person can be hypnotized and ordered not to see someone or something in a room, and he just plain cannot see it, even if you put it right in front of him under bright lights. Whether it was hypnosis or suggestion or something like them—or something infinitely better—Harry did not know, didn't want to know. One thing was certain: nobody else saw (could see?) the Man, and no one but Harry ever heard his questions.

His questions ... only once did the Man from Mars ever make a statement. He only asked questions. It seemed that he wanted to know about human beings, and he had chosen Harry to give the answers. Why Harry? Harry never knew, though he often thought that the Man might have made a better choice. *Only Harry?* Very

probably not. Some of the questions he asked carried a freight of previous knowledge; in such cases, it wasn't *the* answer he was after but Harry's answer. Again: why Harry? Harry never knew.

So the Man from Mars appeared (funny word to use, under the circumstances) one evening when Harry was alone, and asked him, "Mind answering some questions?" and Harry, terrified, jumped up, looked this way, that way, round and back, and blurted: "Who said that? Where are you? What are you—a man from Mars or something?" It was eerie, because there was this sense of the real presence, right there in the room; not a voice from the street or from some other place in the house, and most certainly not a hallucination—he was just too real, too, well, *here*. It was exactly then that the man did whatever it was he did to erase Harry's terror, and never again did Harry feel frightened of the Man. Not even awed. And he never wondered why.

"Mind answering some questions?"

"I guess not. Mind if I ask some?"

"Why should I object? What you want to know?"

Harry pondered. He felt quite comfortable. "How did you get in here? Where did you come from?"

"Do you want a precise answer?"

"Well, sure," said Harry.

"Are you acquainted with the theory of nonfluent time and the present identity of all things, past and future?"

"Well, no," said Harry.

"Then how can I possibly give you a precise answer?"

"Well, you must've come from somewhere!"

"Why?"

"Because you got here!"

"Isn't 'here' somewhere?"

"Well, certainly."

"Then does it satisfy you that I came from here?"

"No it doesn't! You weren't here before and you are now!"

"How can you tell?"

"Well, I never saw you. Heard you. I mean, I—I—oh hell, what do you want, anyway?"

"Mind answering some questions?"

Back to square one! And this is what was to happen every time Harry tried to get an idea of who or what the Man was, or why he wanted his questions answered. He was always let around in a

circle by his own statements and responses. Sometimes it was a big circle and sometimes a little circle, but it went round and round until Harry learned that the only way was to give straight answers to the Man's questions, and put a sharp curb on his own. Besides, you have to understand that he felt quite comfortable with the Man. Really.

Well, he asked questions. He asked questions about morals, about politics, about entertainment, about technology. He asked about pollution, war, religion, history, education, and finance. Sometimes Harry knew the answers and sometimes not; he began a notebook so he could go to the library for information. Sometimes the questions called for opinions; sometimes Harry had very strong ones, sometimes none, sometimes opinions he hadn't known he had until he was asked.

Susan came in, that first night. She wanted to know who he was talking to. Clearly, she couldn't see the Man from Mars. He said he was talking to himself. She didn't believe him. He then said he was talking to the Man from Mars. She said nothing, just went to bed. This happened a number of times. About the third time he broke down and told her the whole story. Shortly after that she moved out. These are very few words to write about Susan, but this isn't her story; and anyway, nothing that happened was her fault in any way. But surely she knows that.

Another sadness for Harry.

He told the Man from Mars about his sadnesses, about what happened at the Espresso and about Humboldt and the parrot, and about the feral children. The feral children was for a long time the saddest thing he knew, until it was replaced by Humboldt and then by Leary's Class Three mutation.

The feral children was, as a sadness, very difficult to explain. It was, as Harry once expressed it, something you could just reach with your fingertips, but never get a grip on. You could touch it did not grasp it.

Feral children are those who have been brought up by with animals. They round one up every few years in India, Africa, South America; there's a very famous case of one picked up in France in the 18th century. If they're captured when they are eleven or twelve years old, they have one thing in common: they can never be taught to speak. "Yes" and "No" and "Pass the salt," sure; but the kind of verbal communication we take so much for

granted is impossible to them. A brain surgeon might tell you that there is nothing detectibly wrong with them, but they just can't learn speech. Now, learning speech is as close to miraculous as anything on this earth. Not for the accomplishment in itself, but because of who does it—little kids. There was a family Harry had read about who lived in India on one of those “stations” the English had during the Empire days. They had three little kids, five, six, seven, and a French tutor who would speak nothing to them but French, and an *amah*, a nursemaid, who knew no English and spoke only Hindi. Those kids could speak English and French and Hindi fluently, with no hesitation, depending on whom they were talking to. A gifted adult might do the same, but never in so short a time or without giving it total concentration and effort. A normal adult, well, just couldn't. And a normal child can, and many do, what those English kids did.

Astronauts called that period of time in which it is possible to launch a rocket at a certain target, taking into account all the variables, a “window.” Before the window is open, you can't launch and get where you're going. After it's closed, you can't launch. Well, it occurred to Harry that there may be a “learning window,” like that that makes it possible for normals to learn speech at a genius level, a window that opens on *something else*. It was here that his fingers touched the thing he couldn't grasp—what that *something else* might be. Maybe ESP or telekinesis or that kind of thing, but maybe not—maybe something different, something entirely new, something as incomprehensible to a normal adult as the transistor or a sonnet would be to a Neanderthal—as incomprehensible as normal speech is to a feral child. The feral child had his speech window open for—how long is a speech window open? Months? Two years, three?—but there was nobody around to put anything into it. So in its own natural time, it closed, as it does for us all (except maybe a thin crack) and the finest teachers with the best teaching methods and devices can't put anything through it ever again, except maybe for a little thin bits pushed into the crack.

And this, in his collection of sadnesses, was unique, because it was the only one he'd never heard or read about; he had worked it out for himself. His conviction was absolute that there was such a window, that it opened, stayed open, stayed open ... and closed, never to be open again, never to accept anything but

slivers or flashes even if someone should appear who had that *something else* in full flower, and the desire and ability to teach it. Down through the generations, child after child had gone about in his jungle, with this window wide and waiting, and while he scratched for food here and knowledge there, nobody, nobody ever came along who was able to put that *something else* through that special window, until, one day, the window was forever closed. My Dad and Mom, thought Harry, never put anything into mine, because their folks never put it into theirs, and when theirs were open ... back and back; Oh God, he would think, why didn't the right person come along back there somewhere and start it; where would we be now.... It was a full-fledged, collectible sadness, but terribly difficult to explain to anybody.

Whether or not the Man from Mars understood it, he was not sure. His assumption was that the Man understood everything.

Harry, mysterious as it was to his friends and acquaintances, loved his work. He was a statistical typist. You know those entire halfpages you'll see in the financial pages sometimes, lists of bonds by number, all in tiny print, and all absolutely correct? That's what he did, stuff like that, and he could proofread it too. Maybe it was a natural talent, plus years of practice, but he could move the figures from copy to eye to keyboard with great speed and accuracy, and never let them touch his mind at all. And that's why he loved it, because nowhere else, not even drowsing on the riverbank on a sunny Sunday, was his mind so free to rove and ponder. The nature of the work meant no phones to answer, hardly even a word to anyone all day: he had an IN box and an OUT box; people slid paper in and took paper away and, unlike the riverbank, no one whanged him awake with a misplaced frisbee or started fighting or baby-bawling, and he was free of bird-droppings and ants.

During the many weeks of his communication with the Man from Mars, he strove and drove to squeeze some pattern out of the questions, and the kinds of questions, he was being asked (but there were so many of them, and so many kinds!). Yet no one at work was aware of it—same old Harry, doing the same old thing in the same way every day. And in the evenings he simply stopped seeing anybody or going anywhere where he might; and after Susan left, that was easy. So when things came to a head,

there was no one to know, no one to stop it.

“Could the earth produce enough food to take care of everybody on it?”

“I guess so. Yes, it could—I read that some place.”

“Does the earth produce enough for everyone?”

“Oh no. Well, now—wait. We throw a lot away, here in this country and others, too. And we eat more than we need to, that’s for sure. Seems like seven, eight people out of ten are all the time trying to lose weight. I dunno. Maybe if it was shared around, and all that money didn’t go into junk and convenience food, yes, maybe we do produce enough. It wouldn’t be much fun, though, eating, I mean.”

“What about energy?”

“Oh, you mean oil. We’re not in very good shape about oil. There’s not enough of it in the right places, and the guys who have it are getting more and more hard-nosed, and it is costing more all the time to find it and get it out. We could have a war over that, if it gets tight enough.”

“Does energy mean oil?”

“Mostly it does. Then there’s natural gas, but the problem there is the same as with oil, and we’re using it up awful awful fast. Then, coal. There is plenty of coal, but the cheapest way to get it tears up whole counties, and if the mining people have to straighten out the mess, the cost goes up. And mostly it burns dirty, and to get clean burning fuel out of it, or to make a substitute gasoline, that costs more again.”

“Is there no other kind of energy except through fossil fuels?”

“Oh sure. Geothermal, but that can be tapped in only a few places here and there. Atomic—atomic fission, that is, but there’s a lot of worry about where to bury the waste, because it’s radioactive and will stay radioactive for a lot of years. We have a handhold on fusion, so I hear, but it won’t be ready in any amount in a long time. There’s some new work in wind power and even tidal energy from the sea, and solar power, but none that amounts to much, yet. And yeah, methane and methanol. I read some place where Los Angeles, California produces enough solid waste every single day that if it could be turned into methane and methanol, it could power the entire tier of Pacific states from Canada to Mexico!”

“And there’s no effort to use this instead of fossil fuels?”

“Here and there—Seattle, St. Louis, a few farmers, maybe some more I haven’t heard about.”

“Why isn’t a really major effort being made to get rid of fossil fuels altogether?”

“Search me. Turning all our solid pollution into clean fuels like methanol would get rid of most air pollution as well, right? I guess it’s because fossil fuels offered the biggest profit the fastest, and that just has to go on until they’re gone, no matter what the side effects—even war.”

“Do you really need all the energy you use?”

“Well, we’re trying to cut down.”

Patiently, “Do you really need all the energy you use?”

“Well, no. I guess not. Not here, anyway. It’s like the food.”

At work, while eyes and fingers did their mindless thing, Harry mulled over the true nature of the Man from Mars, who wasn’t a man, who wasn’t from Mars. Right at the beginning he had said—asked—something about synchronicity, something about past and future and “now” existing all at once. Kurt Vonnegut, Jr., in *Slaughterhouse Five*, came up with an idea like that, on the planet Tralfamadore, where the natives could see time, all of time, as if it were a long valley and they were looking down on it from a mountaintop—beginning, middle, end, all of it. And we think that time as a moving stream, sequential, linear, we are sealed inside a tank car on a railroad running up through the valley, and we could look out through lengths of four-inch pipe sticking out of the tank car like naval rifles out of a battleship, and we could see the scenery passing as the train moved up the valley, only we didn’t know it was a train, we didn’t know it was moving, we thought we were seeing events begin and progress and end.

Well, maybe that’s where the Man came from, or somewhere like it. There are a lot of mystics and the like who come up with ideas like that: that there’s really only one electron in the whole universe, and it travels backward and forward in time so it seems to reproduce itself exponentially. Some say consciousness affects the universe, even creates it; some say the universe *is* a consciousness. It’s not only mystics: some far out, high-altitude physicists are going that route.

Harry wasn’t about to pull a theory out of such a cosmic

quagmire, not one he could believe. What he could and did believe is that the Man was real, as real as an IBM typesetter or a ham on rye. Given that, he had to accept the idea that the Man came from a place where all of time was visible and reachable. Maybe in a place like that time and space and matter and energy were interchangeable, like Einstein suspected; if so the notion of transforming one into the other (like transforming electricity into heat or mechanical motion and back again) wasn't so hard to follow. If you can look calmly at the idea that all times exist simultaneously, then you can look at the idea that all places are likewise "here." To travel from one place to another is done by not traveling at all, but by being totally aware of the "hereness" of the place you want to be. This takes no time, and in this sense there is no distance, and the limitations of the speed of light have nothing to do with it.

"Wow," said Harry, loud enough to cause a financial editor to swivel around in his chair; but Harry went on working and the editor swiveled back.

What he dredged up out of all this was that no matter where or when the Man came from, he probably knew the future; and (although up to now Harry had not been particularly successful at it) had allowed that he was willing to answer questions. Maybe Harry just hadn't asked the right questions.

Well, now he would.

He felt good.

He felt—armed.

"Would it make a difference in this world," asked the Man from Mars, "if every person treated every other person exactly the way he or she would like to be treated?"

"A difference? It wouldn't be this world. It would be heaven. Anyway it can't happen here." He felt very sure of this one. He'd been through this one in college. "What you are talking about is the Golden Rule. A very old idea. I once read a collection of quotations from seventeen major religions, and every single one of them said the same thing, although the phrasing was slightly different. 'Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.' 'Do as you would be done by.' A fine old notion, but it can't work."

"Why not?"

“Well, take a big simple example. Balance of trade. When a country exports more than it imports—sells more than it buys—that’s called a ‘favorable balance of trade.’ If you’re the seller and I’m the buyer, you win on the deal; to the extent you win, I lose.”

“So it isn’t a balance?”

“Of course it isn’t. If men and nations started treating each other by a Golden Rule sort of balance, maybe nobody would lose—but nobody would win either, and that’s where it breaks down.”

“Wouldn’t the whole world win?”

Harry hit himself on the chest. “Number One here wouldn’t—couldn’t win, and that’s intolerable to a man or nation.”

“Is there no feeling that all men are one, that all of them get tired in the same way, or hungry, or happy?”

“There’s a word for that. Em-something. Empathy. Feeling with someone else’s fingertips, seeing through someone else’s eyes. ‘Walk a mile in another man’s moccasins,’ some Indian said. Sympathy, now, there’s a lot of that from time to time, like when someone has an earthquake or a typhoon or something. But empathy, there’s not too much of that around.”

“Is there no teaching not only that all men are one, but that all things are one thing?”

“Oh sure. Millions of people practice a religion that says just that. They go around chanting a word: *Aum* or *Om* that means (if I understand it right) both ‘one’ and ‘all.’ And they keep saying to each other (and anyone else who happens along) ‘Thou art God.’ But I can’t see how it’s changed the way the world is run in any important way. But speaking of ‘Thou arts,’ I have a couple questions to ask, and I think you’ll agree it’s time I had my innings.”

“You wish to question me?”

“Yes I wish.”

“Are you aware that any correctly structured question embodies its own answer, and therefore need not be asked?”

“No you don’t!” rapped Harry. “I’m not getting led around the corral and right back to the gate again, not this time.”

“What is your question?”

“Questions, plural. First: do you know the future?”

“What future is that? Yours? This nation’s? Your species’? This planet? What you call the universe, perhaps, or what I call it?”

Harry had to admit that that was a good response. He certainly wasn't calling for a detailed chronology of the cosmos from now on out to the next Big Bang. He did feel, too, that buried in that response somewhere was "Yes." It certainly wasn't a "No."

"Okay, okay, I see I'll have to take it by little steps or you'll lose me. Let's start with you, and your 'correctly structured questions.' If they need not be asked, how come you've been asking? Wouldn't the World Almanac have done a better job for you?"

"Is there anything in the World Almanac which deals, not with facts, but with your perception of the facts? Is there any way to study that without questioning you?"

"All right, I can buy that. It isn't my world and my time you're studying, but how a man of my world and my time thinks about it. Hmp. I really think we're getting somewhere." Also, he was more than a little flattered, but he wouldn't say that. "Now, about that mutation I told you about, that would turn out to be meaningless unless it was identified, understood, exercised: was the man right?"

"Can there be any doubt?"

That was as close to a flat 'Yes' as he gotten so far. He was increasingly pleased.

"And has it been identified and understood?"

"Haven't you heard the chants of *Om*? Aren't you aware of all the consciousness-raising groups, the Macro Philosophy, TA, TM, the Self Realization Fellowship, and all those people you yourself describe (and there are nearly a billion of them by now, by the way) as going around saying 'Thou art God'?"

"Then we've found it, we've got it, we've saved it! right?"

AUTHOR'S NOTE:

This manuscript arrived in my mailbox, forwarded from one of my publishers. The covering letter was signed "Susan" but neither it nor the envelope bore a return address. And with the manuscript was a sealed envelope. I give you excerpts from Susan's letter, with my annotations.

"Harry's notebook was found on his desk with a letter to me clipped to it. The letter is personal, so I'm not sending it, but the part about you is, he wanted me to type up what he wrote double-spaced, inch-and-a-half margins, one side of the paper,

pages numbered. [She did—impeccably. TS] he said to send it to you, maybe you can get it published. He said maybe you better use your name, it might have a better chance that way. He said if they pay you any money, keep it, you earned it because of something you wrote long time ago. He said you would know what that was. [I don't. TS]

"He said after I typed the last page to put it in a separate envelope and seal it. He wanted you to look at what he wrote and think about it a while before reading the last page and decide whether it is too dangerous to print, some people might get upset.

"I have to tell you I am upset. I feel real bad about the whole thing. To me what he wrote is a suicide note. My shrink says it is usual for a survivor to feel responsible for a death, especially if it is or might be a suicide, so don't worry, I'll get over it, thousands have. Anyway he had a bad heart. I think the story is very sad. Harry likes sad things. I once told him sad things make him happy. If that is so and this is the saddest thing he ever dreamed up, then he died happy. I guess that is a bitter thing to say but I will leave it lay. Like I said, I'm upset. Harry and I had a good thing going for quite a while until he got the crazies with talking to himself and all and I took off.

"One thing I can tell you, why it is he wrote this thing in third person 'He' instead of first-person 'I.' My shrink believes in journals, the patient should write about himself in third person, it makes him stand off from himself. I told Harry that and I think that's why he did it. They found him dead at his desk at home week ago Monday, he must of died right after he finished the letter to me. Don't try to find me, I just did what he wanted, now I don't want any part of this anymore, and thank you."

I read the story without the last page, and then I read the last page. In Susan's words, because "I just did what he wanted," (and I'm intuitively sure that is what he wanted) I give you his last page. Rest in peace, Harry.

And the Man from Mars hesitated, for the very first time; and in that exceedingly brief moment, Harry had a flash of insight that cut deep into his marrow. It was this: that he had been insulated against fear by this Man; and when you have no fear, you may not be reached by anyone else's emotion. Anger can't

reach the fearless, danger, hopelessness, despair; fear is the trigger to the healthy survival mechanisms of fight and of flight; fear also is the measure of that which is dear and cherished: fear of its loss. Never until now had Harry perceived the slightest hint of emotion from the Man; but now, in that slight hesitation, a hot wave of emotion burst from him and sliced through the barrier of fearlessness—and was gone. Harry identified it. It was compassion.

“Do you really want to know?”

Fearless again, Harry responded: “I asked you, didn’t I?”

Then it was (for the very first time) that the Man from Mars uttered something that was not a question, something that described a species rocketing up away from and above all others, using only a part of its gift, and the world that must ensue from that terrible and tragic imbalance.

“Identifying it and understanding it are not enough. The appearance of great and gifted gurus is not enough. Can the professor of speech teach a feral child?

“No, Harry; it cannot be taught. It is too late. The gift is lost. The window is closed. It closed nearly three thousand years ago.”

Then he left, and Harry went and got his notebook and began to write.

Time Warp

He was sleek and he was furry; he was totally amphibious, and Althair the Adventurer was what he really was. However, he was known, on his lovely planet Ceer, as Althair the Storyteller just because he did that better—better even than adventuring, at which he was a marvel.

His people called his planet “Ceer, the planet indetectable,” and that it really was. It had no smoke or factories, machines or jails or presidents; just uncommanded beauty made of waves and wilderness. It had a kind of shrub-tree plant that would yield to mental pressure and produce the living living-shelters, cupping coolness by day and hoarding heat at night.

A heavy planet, Ceer, with strong inhabitants, who had still stronger minds—so strong that with a ceremony they had linked their minds together and created an integument, a kind of shell, a shield around their worlds that bent all outside rays and gravities. Reflecting and occulting nothing, it concealed the planet’s mass, and more: concealed its absence; yet the peopled plains and oceans could see the friendly stars unhampered. The peoples’ name was Zado.

Story time! Story time! Slithering, lithe, surfing, sliding, inchworming, crackly-whiskered, beady-bright, soft, smooth and shining, came the young, the pups and pammies gathering round. Story time! Story time!

Althair, a tower in a sea excited, waited out the shouldering, scrabbling, let-me-near silencing, until at last *they* did all the waiting.

“Today, I will tell you (Althair began) of the planet Orel and the horror that happened there; but first I must tell you about a pup and pammie older than yourselves who were just about as big as me, and lived on a planet with the name Earth. Their names were Will Hawcline and Jonna Verret....” (There was a clatter of chittering giggles as the little Zados tried to say the funny names and could not. Althair let them try, then raised his head. They shushed.)

“Will Hawklane and Jonna Verret lived on an island renamed Avalon, which they had made beautiful and kept beautiful, and saw hardly at all for their working. Will was very important, being Coordinator of the Time Center, which means he said what to do and everybody did it. Jonna was the best test pilot he had, which means when Time Center built something, she tried it out. Way down deep Will was angry at Jonna, though he never said it and maybe didn’t know it. He wished for a test pilot bigger and older than he was, so he could tell him what to do and see him do it. Jonna was younger and smaller and she was a pammie but good is good and there’s no arguing that. So he was angry because she was a pammie and she was the best in the world at what she did.” (Althair boomed along with the chittering chuckles. It certainly was funny.)

There were lots of other people on Avalon, of course, but they’re not really in this story, except for the Little Johns. Now the Little Johns were very special. You see, Earth people were slowpokes, so they built things called computers which could logic much faster than they could. The first Little John had the strange ability to think himself into a computer, or think the computer into himself. So he could then do create/computing almost as well as a Zado—as long as he was linked to a computer. Without a computer he was just another slowpoke. So they cloned him a dozen times, creating a dozen Little Johns.

That’s what the Time Center was all about—to stop Earth from being a slowpoke. When they wanted to go to another star, they could get inside a big metal jug and fly it in real-time, which took so long they had to go to sleep until they got there a long time later. Then when they got back to Earth the same way, all their friends were long ago dead of old age. *Or*, they could get into a different kind of jug and fly to the star faster than light, and not have to go to sleep for hundreds of lifetimes; but when they got back, time had still passed on Earth and their friends had still died away. Earth time and jug time were just too different.

But Will Hawklane, with the help of his computers and his people and the Little Johns, Will Hawklane did it! He found a way to separate time from space-time, so his little jugs could go *back* a little way in time while they went forward a long way in space—all at once! That way space travelers could go away to a star and come back again, while the people they loved were still alive to

welcome them and listen to their stories. I know that's a long funny way to solve a problem, but then they weren't Zados, and you have to admire them. Jonna Verret tested the new little jugs—*scouts* is the Earth name for them—and they worked, and because they worked, a terrible thing happened. And now I will tell you about Mindpod, and Orel.

No one knows when or where it came from, but a great dark jug landed on the planet Orel, and in it were twenty-six *things*, alive and awful, which together are called Mindpod. Zados are not the only ones in the universe who can link minds, but unlike us, the Mindpod used their linkage as a weapon.

Orel was a wild place where the biggest animal was a meercath, a lizard with thick quick hind legs and small deft hands, bigger than me, with a toothy mouth that could take off my head, and a mind just good enough to feed and be happy. In a *blip!* the Mindpod had those meercaths' minds, and all they would do forever after was to make weapons and go off to other worlds to kill and destroy. Nothing could ever give them back their own minds. A meercath commanded by the Mindpod is a terrible thing. And there were enough worlds within reach of the Mindpod's big dark jug—the Earth word for it is *cruiser*—that the Mindpod itself could rest safely on Orel for a very long time, and take other worlds that take other worlds and Oh! (Oh! cried the young ones. Oh! they wept.)

The Mindpod cruiser had in it all sorts of structures and inventions that could do things that the Mindpod could not—they were rather like Earth people that way, but not at all funny. They had feeler things and listening things and find-out things so that they knew right away what had happened when Jonna tested the back-in-time jug, the little one she called a 'scout.' That made the Mindpod afraid. When the Mindpod was afraid it was immediately very, very angry. It knew how to travel in zero time but it didn't know how to travel back in time, so the Mindpod sent a cruiser toward Earth to steal and destroy.

On Avalon, in Time Center Control, Jonna had just come in from the last of her flights. She stood proud and happy, happy because she had done everything right, happy for Will too, because it was truly a great thing he had done. Will Hawklane looked at her, how she stood smiling, her hair a bright tumble,

her eyes pleased and giving. Just for a moment his regret that she was a pammie and not a bigger and older pup grew smaller and he smiled and took her hand.

At that moment the very walls boomed with a terrible voice:

Attention Time Center: You have one complete revolution of your planet to prepare all records of your experiments and to have yourselves and the records ready for pickup. One hour later planet detonation will occur, whether or not you are planetside.

Will Hawkline, still holding Jonna's hand though he had quite forgotten it, bawled "Little John!"

Immediately Little John Five stepped up—a big Earth person, strong as a Zado, with close golden hair and eyes very wide apart. Will Hawkline cried: "I have done a terrible thing, but—how could I know? Who are they? What do they want? Can they do what they say?"

The large growing eyes closed; and now the Little John was one with the big computer and its instant logic and immense memory. He said, "Subspace wake-trace indicates that they came in zero time from OREL—Orion Remote Earthtype Landbase. Who they are: No data, except that they are not indigenous to Orel. Can they do what they say: All relevant data indicate that they can, to a probability of 99.11 nines. Could you have known: You could not. What do they want: Clearly, it is the back-in-time scout device; if they had it they would have used it, and would have struck before our tests."

"But if we don't give it to them, they'll blow us up anyway, and then they'll never have it."

"Which indicates they are afraid of it. If they can't have it, no one will have it."

"Then they've given us the answer." When Will Hawkline made up his mind, he did it altogether. "If they're *afraid* of it, we'll use it. We'll arrive on Orel before they leave and stop them." He turned to Harper Townsend, his chief of operations. "Harper—are both scouts ready for launch?" At his nod: "Jonna—are you willing to take a Little John and go to Orel, while I take the other scout and rendezvous with you before they attack?"

Her face told him how ready and willing she was.

"Then let's go! Harper, put every computer on the problem of

destroying that cruiser—but don't make a move until the last minute, or they'll strike before the deadline."

He sprinted toward the launch gate and only then realized he was still holding Jonna's hand—he almost pulled her off her feet. "Sorry," he said and was gone. She looked sadly at her hand. "Sorry?" she said, then turned and ran for her own scout, shouting for Little John Twelve.

And you know, by the time they were in their scouts, the Little Johns and the computers had worked out every single figuring they needed to make the trip back in time, forth in space, to Orel before the Mindpod cruiser left.

At that very moment, on the place in the dark cruiser where the devices that made it go were—the Earth word is "bridge"—a meercath left his lace of blinking lights and came to the commander. "There are stowaways, sir." (That's the way they talk in jugs. And a stowaway is a person who gets on a jug or whatever they call them, without anyone knowing.) "Stowaways, sir. I thought at first there were three, then it seemed like four. Anyway, it's certainly two."

"Start a search then," the commander said. "Every compartment, room, pathway." The meercath went away, and another one called out, "Small craft leaving the planet, sir." But even as they fixed their look-at thing on it and spit fire, the scout slipped into faster-than-light and was lost to them. Just then another appeared, and a great fan of flame swept out from the Orellian cruiser and sliced off a tail section just before this scout flung itself into faster-than-light and also escaped the attack.

None of us could possibly know what it's like to fly out in one of those little scouts. Acceleration squeezes you backward until you can't breathe any more and you can't see anything right or really think straight, and all of a sudden there's a great bloom of light, a spinning spiral, and you're in another universe full of grey shapes that make you dizzy when you look at them. In time—how much time depends how far in real-space you are going—you're back in this universe, blinking at a whole different set of stars, with a strange planet floating nearby. Terrifying.

But for Will Hawklane it was infinitely worse. Seconds before they slipped into faster-than-light, "We're hit!" Little John Five cried out, and Will Hawklane said, "Too bad, but we're counting down and we're going out anyway!" At that, the bloom of light

spiraled around them and they were in the grey place, and—*crunch-ring-blanc*—things broke in the scout's insides. Their lights went out and flared bright and dim again. "Damage report," Will Hawkline ordered, and the Little John told him a long list of awful things. "Can you get a fix on Jonna?" And that was worst of all.

"She's on Orel—on the surface!"

"Captured," Will Hawkline whispered, and oh, he had a feeling inside himself he didn't know he could feel. "She's alive though," he almost-said, almost asked. "She's alive," said the Little John. "But they are doing something to her."

Oh yes they were doing something to her. She was flat out under a force-beam with a fearful light shining on and through her, and bending over her was one of the actual members of the Mindpod; and I can't tell you what it looked like because no one's told me, except that it was horrible beyond description so that even if I could I wouldn't. And it said:

"We have placed a substance in your bloodstream which will kill you in a very special way. There is an antidote, but after a certain time it will become ineffective, and you will stay locked in a world of visions so dreadful that you will die of your own free will to escape them. So quickly now: answer my questions. What was the mission? What kind of work was going on at your Time Center? Who were you trying to contact when we captured your scout ...?"—question, question, question.

Jonna lay there and spoke only once: "Little John Twelve was right." And then she wouldn't explain. For when the tractor beam from Orel took them, Little John Twelve said to her quietly, talking the way Little Johns do: "The probability of escape is negligible. My ability to refuse the information they will demand, not only of me, but of the entire contents of our computer banks, is equally negligible. There is therefore only one reasonable course. It has been nice knowing you, Jonna Verret," whereupon he smiled slightly and died.

She remembered wondering through her shock and fear what it must be like to be a clone among clones. He was as real as she was, yet dying could hardly be the same thing, for all the Little Johns had complete access to everything Twelve had ever done or thought or felt, so in a way he would live on in all of them, more than a memory.

Now, helpless under the light, his words rang in her mind: "There is therefore only one reasonable course ..." and she closed her eyes. But she didn't know how to die this way, and she did not know—yet—if she really wanted to.

And the light burned on, and the questions rained down, and it seemed that the pod member's face (if that could indeed be a face) grew larger and larger until it filled the room, the planet, and the endless space outside, and its wet pores grew into caves and from them came dripping horrors with pointed, poisoned teeth and sounds more ghastly than any sight, sounds rising growlhowl scream shriek, and loud and more and huge and new worse sights ashake, ashudder and tearing apart with the noise absolute; and all at once dead quiet so sudden it was agony, and in a dim radiance stood Will Hawkline smiling, smiling at last right at her, his eyes captured by hers, his hand out, *his arms out*, and, and, a spear of white metal striking up from somewhere, entering his breast and emerging scarlet from the top of his head, and oh, his look of complete astonishment as she screamed at last, then all was dark, then she was gone....

"Gone," said Little John Five in the scout with Will Hawkline. "She's gone."

Never knowing Jonna's last most terrible illusion, Will Hawkline asked, out of a dry throat, "What do you mean gone?" feeling again that which he had not known he could feel.

"No sign now from Orel, not from her.... Are you well? Your breathing stopped." It started again with a great shudder. The Little John said, "And yet I have her life signals.... No, this can't be. This is not in my data banks."

"What? What?"

"The life signals come from another place.... Not Orel at all, but nowhere else either. No chart or surveyor probe has ever reported anything but emptiness just there. And yet—I get her sign."

"Pull out of this into real-space, and set a course, and go there, wherever she is," Will cried harshly.

"But Orel ... the cruiser ... the detonation of Earth—"

"Five, I order you." And the Little John obeyed, saying only, "You know we're damaged," and did the things necessary to fling them into the real. A moment's observation and the Little John had set the new course and flung them spiraling into the grey.

“You still get signs?”

“Naturally not.”

“What do you mean naturally not?”

“Forward in space, backward in time,” the Little John said. “Have you forgotten? She will not have arrived there yet. Wherever ‘there’ is.”

Off they went then, back in time, forward in space, until they emerged; and there, where all the data banks everywhere said there was nothing, was a planet in orbit around a distant star—distant enough and so erratically aflame that there had never been (would be) a reason to look for perturbations. They stared at the world in wonder until Will Hawklane said, “It’s molten. The planet’s molten!”

“Yes. It’s newborn.”

“We’ve come *that far back*?” And the Little John answered, “We’re damaged.”

“Orbit in close,” said Will Hawklane, “and speed up our time.” Reluctantly the scout responded and they watched in fascination the agonies of a molten ball becoming a world, its heaving throes and spouts of lava, gouts of flame and writhes of color as the strata turned up edgewise and sank again; then a nearly endless time of clouds and fireflickers, and the emergence of land and oceans, land that stayed, land that sank, oceans roaring across land newly alive with grasses just invented.

And at last the beauty came, and calm—isthmus and estuary making firm agreements with the island-dotted sea, and life flourishing at last, sure and powerfully evolving. And for Will, a growing sense of presence, of a newer kind of mind, strong and gentle and sane and fearless. “Do you feel it?”

“Feel what?” And by ‘what,’ Will Hawklane knew that a Little John, for all his mental powers, could not feel certain things.

Then together, they gasped.

It was—*gone*. The planet vanished! All about them the stars shone, the distant sun flamed, but this world was gone. Because he felt what he felt, Will Hawklane said, “Tighten your orbit. Move in closer.”

“Orbit around what? Closer to *what*? There’s nothing there anymore! I can’t see it, my instruments can’t see it....” Will Hawklane had never seen a Little John so upset. But he could feel the emanations of Mind close by, and he smiled and said,

“Pretend it’s still there, and go down.”

Obediently the Little John did it. Nothing, and nothing, and “ah.”

And of course you know where they were, and when. They had witnessed the birth of our dear Ceer, and the beginnings of our shield, and had now passed inside it and were filled with wonder.

“Her signs! Her signs! She’s alive here!” The Little John was really excited: amazing! And just then the scout gave a sickening lurch and Will himself overrode the computerized controls and summoned his old skill as a pilot—trained to manage these flying things with his own two hands. He righted it, but lost a great deal of altitude, and the scout apparently disliked his firmness because it fought back and set up a great grinding clatter from somewhere inside it. “Where is she?” he shouted over the noise.

“Over there, right at the base of the peninsula! But there’s a mountain ...”

Will Hawklane saw it, then lost it in the rush of clouds and rain that swept down on it. He turned toward where he thought Jonna was.

“Climb! Climb!”

“Climb she won’t,” Will said grimly. “Anyway, I don’t see any mountain now,” which was perfectly true. As if insulted, the mountain reached up a high crag, or seemed to, and gouged out a slit a third of the way down the hull, throwing the nose of the scout almost straight up. Through the slit, which stopped just under his feet, he got a split-second glimpse of the peninsula and a wide flat meadow. As the nose came down he swung it that way. The scout tilted to the left and wouldn’t correct, and they came in like that, skittered and slid, nose down, up and over, and it was all black everywhere and quiet.

The first thing Will Hawklane saw as he came out of the blackness was something he couldn’t believe.

Me.

The next thing he knew was that the warm pillow under his head spoke to him: “Will ... Oh Will—are you all right?” It had Jonna Verret’s voice because the pillow was Jonna Verret’s lap. He tipped his head back and looked at her and then again at me, and tried to sit up and scrabble backwards at once. I think he was afraid. Maybe my teeth. Jonna said, “It’s all right, Will. That’s

Althair. He pulled you out of the scout.”

“What was left of it,” said the Little John. Will saw him sitting on the floor nearby. He had a bump over one eye but seemed well otherwise. They were in what Will thought was a polished wooden cave. Well, what would you think if you’d never seen one of our living living-places before?

Anyway, you never heard such a flurry of questions in your life, and if it hadn’t been for Little John Five sitting there nodding his big golden head every now and then, I don’t think Will Hawkline would have believed a word of it. He had to know all about Ceer and we Zados, and the shield we thought up around our planet, and why we have no machines, and how we grow living-places and see-far and move to other worlds when we want to, without jugs.

“The Zados took me away from the Mindpod on Orel,” Jonna told him. “Right out from under a force-beam. They brought me here and stopped the poison the Mindpod had put into my blood and made me well all over, even my head.” And Will had to believe it, because she was here. But when I tried to explain how that making where she was, the only place in the universe she couldn’t be (so she disappeared) and Ceer the only place in the universe she could be, he couldn’t understand it. Slowpokes think tools, you see. When they want to do something, the first thing they look for is something outside of themselves to do it with; tools, machines, inventions. They can do a lot with tools, but that kind of thinking keeps them from doing things the simple way, which is why they are slowpokes. What makes them so funny is that they don’t have to be slowpokes, and they just are.

Will Hawkline was very very bright; you have to understand that. He had to be, to have become Coordinator of his Time Center on Avalon while still so young. As I told you, that is a very high place to reach on Earth. But he was bright in a way that made things a lot more difficult than they had to be. He never stopped asking questions, which is a fine thing in itself, but when he couldn’t understand the answers, he wanted to stop and work at it, and found it very hard just to accept and go on. We can do certain things, we Zados. We had proved it to him. But it was very uphill for him to use what we could do without knowing how it worked, and without tools and inventions to test all the parts. *Acceptance* is the big word. Acceptance was very hard for

Will Hawklane.

Little John Five was no problem. He could think like a living thinker, but he was conditioned by computers and computers can't think. Computers now—*they* know the meaning of acceptance. And Jonna ... well, she was a pammie, and Earth pammies are sort of special, and seem to be able to know a great many things without needing to be told. Acceptance is easier for them.

By this time, of course, I knew all about the terrible things the Pod had done to Jonna on Orel (we had known about the Mindpod by our own mindnet from the moment they landed there, and had been watching) and also about the threat to Earth. And we had worked out a plan.

To do it, we would have to get into the caves under the big basket-cradle, the Little John called it, which held the Orellian cruiser on the surface of Orel. (Orel is mostly porous under the surface, great chains and tangles of holes and caves.) We could then try to get into the cruiser itself and see what we could do from there.

Getting to Orel was a lot harder than it had to be, mostly because of Will Hawklane's insistence on understanding everything we did. When I told him that the Zado High Council would convene for the ritual which would take us to Orel, he wanted to know where the council would meet, and I had to explain that it didn't actually meet at any certain place; the mindnet could be cast wherever the Council Zados happened to be. Then I had to tell him what to do with his own mind, which is just *accept*. And at first he wouldn't and then he couldn't, and I had a time, I tell you, showing him how he could. I didn't want him to see me laughing, and really, that was the hardest part.

I got them all comfortable and convened the High Council and we started to weave the Net that would send us to Orel. And wouldn't you know the moment the Ceer-reality began to fade around us, up pops Will Hawklane, bolt upright, demanding to know what's happening, and of course he broke the net and we had to start all over.

I was going to speak to him but Jonna said, "Let me," and went and sat down beside him. She took both his hands and looked into his eyes and said, "Will—just let it happen. Trust," she said. "Trust. Go with me." And while she held him with her hands and

her eyes I quickly convened again. We got a good Net this time. The glowing sound-beds of shimmer lifted us and *blip!* we were in the caves on Orel.

Whatever Will Hawkline or any of them were going to say then, they didn't say it. Not so much because of the caves themselves, the crazy light (there are patches of luminescent rock, blue and green, and reddish moss and fungus that glows purple) and the odd smell of the air; none of this. It was the meercath standing there, scratching its stomach with one of its little hands. It was wearing a harness with a heat weapon stuck on it. It was the first meercath the Earth folk had ever seen and I guess I don't blame them for being upset. Jonna made a little scream and the Little John opened his big eyes wide, and Will Hawkline slapped a weapon out of his belt and *whssst!* blew the meercath's big head right off.

I was not pleased about that. I had never thought to tell them, but I had a shield around us just like the one we put around Ceer, and the meercath never knew we were there. But now that Will Hawkline had used his weapon, the whole planet, or anyway the Mindpod, knew it and knew where we were. I didn't tell him this. Zados do not say things that make anyone unhappy. Will Hawkline was pleased and it was too late to correct what he had done. I took the heat weapon away from the dead meercath and gave it to Will Hawkline and showed him how to use it, and asked him for his; I told him the Mindpod could find us instantly if it was used again, but the meercath's weapon would be harder to trace.

Then we ran. Oh, we ran! I led them through the caves and into the labyrinth under the cradle, and you know I couldn't create the shield while we were moving that fast. Another meercath saw us and set up that horrible wailing cry, and in a moment it was coming from everywhere. We ran through the green and blue, through patches of purple, and soon there came the bright orange flare of the heat weapons.

At last we were where I wanted us to be, right under the cradle, but it happened to be a blind corridor as well. If the meercaths found us here it would be a bad thing. As long as we were running they would try to bring us down with their heat-things, but if they had us trapped they would catch us and pull us apart and bite. That's the way the Mindpod trained them.

There was only one thing I could do—make a little mindnet and get us out of there. But I would need their help. Jonna and Little John Five seemed to understand right away what I needed—just to relax, give themselves to me and the net—and oh, how I wished Will Hawkline was a little less curious, a little less brave, and maybe a little more stupid! I will give him credit: he tried, but then he saw the meercaths, two, three, then seven, eight, nine of them. I instantly threw up the shield—I didn't need their help for that—and they could not see us, and in a moment they would have moved on to search somewhere else. But Will Hawkline could see them as clearly as we can see the stars here on Ceer, and he raised the meercath heat-thing I had given him and sent a great orange flash down the corridor. Two of the meercaths went down howling, and then they all knew for sure where we were.

Will Hawkline went down on one knee and steadied his weapon, and I thought, "That is the tool-craziest slowpoke in all the Known and Unknown!" I shouted in words and inside their heads to Jonna and the Little John: *give me you!* and they did, and while the meercaths were wading through the horrible mess Will had made in the corridor, I flung the energy they gave me, together with my own, against the soft rocks overhead and a huge section came crashing down, shutting it off.

In the sudden silence and swirling dust I said to Will Hawkline, "Now if you can't do what I ask, don't do *anything!*" as gently as I could. Maybe it was this or maybe the way Jonna and the Little John looked at him, but he became very quiet and almost helpful.

I called on the Ceer net with the precise locus, and as around us the cave faded away, metal walls, flat and dark, took their place. We were inside the Orellian cruiser, and almost before we could take a breath, we had that crazy spinny inside-out feeling of space travel, zero time. The cruiser had lifted. It was a close thing.

It probably took us a little while to be able to think straight—you pups and pammies will never know what a wringing out you get from traveling that way. Once I got my wits back, I looked around. Flat metal walls. Dark. I made it a little lighter. Jonna and Will were stretched out, I guess still waiting for their minds to catch up with them. Little John Five was sitting up wagging his big head.

"Five," I said, "can you think-in to the computer on this

cruiser?”

He looked at me. If he was surprised to see me shining in the dark he didn't say so. He closed his eyes and made some sort of effort. He opened his eyes and said, "It's different...."

"You have to expect that. But isn't it the same in some ways?"

He closed his eyes again. After a while he nodded his head. "In a lot of ways."

"Can you learn it?"

"I think so."

"You do that, Five. Think-in all the way. Think-in so far that when they start looking for us with their finder-thing, they will think you are another part of their own computer. Can you see out of their see-it thing? I want to know where we are," I said. "I'll help," I said.

He tried hard. I picked up what he mindsaw and made it shine on the dark wall. It was like a window. There was a planet....

"My God," I heard behind me, "that's Earth!"

"There's Avalon—see?"

"All right, that's where we are. I would like to know *when* we are," I said.

"I do not have the referents," the Little John said.

"I do. *Look!*" Will Hawkline cried out. In the picture, from the curve of the planet's shoulder, came a tiny golden spark. "A scout," said Jonna Verret. "It's ... could it be ..."

Across the picture came a line of fire, at almost the exact moment the scout winked out in that special way a craft flares when it slips into faster-than-light. A moment later another spark appeared, the fire speared out and sliced into the tail section just before the ship disappeared. Somehow, the faster-than-light change came when it was strangely brighter than the first one.

"It—it's us. *Me*. They're going to do terrible things to—to her."

I decided to do a kind thing. I used a piece of the net and made it say to Jonna, deeply, "Sleep." And I said to Will Hawkline, "Sleep." They slept. They slept so deeply that even the Mindpod's probes and search-sees wouldn't know they were there. Then I said to the Little John: "Five: they are hidden in a special way, and I can put up my own shield. By now you know how they will search; can you make yourself seem like part of their computer? So much so they will not find you?" He said he could. Then I told

him what to do.

When it was right, I got the net to bring Will Hawklane and Janna up and up through their deeps until they were normally asleep, and then I woke them.

Immediately Little John Five said, "The computer reports stowaways. A meercath has told the commander."

I said, "That's all right."

The Little John said, "The commander has ordered a search."

I said, "That's all right too."

Jonna said, "Can we hide somewhere?"

I said I didn't think so—not for long.

Jonna said, "You can't mean for us just to sit here until they come for us!"

"They won't take us without a fight," Will Hawklane said, and he took the meercath heat-thing out of his belt; and wouldn't you know before I could say another word the door of the compartment crashed open and there stood a meercath guard. Will aimed his weapon and of course nothing happened because I had taken the charges out while he slept. I had neglected, however, to remove one patch of stupidity or his appalling bravery. As the giant meercath opened his mouth to squall, Will Hawklane flung himself across the compartment and shoved the weapon between all those big teeth and into the meercath's throat. And he didn't stop with that. With the momentum of his rush he placed a hand on the meercath's head and vaulted up and around, clamping his legs above and below the meercath's long snout, forcing its jaws closed. I remembered then that all big lizards, especially the one with long jaws, might have, like a meercath, a bite powerful enough to nip someone my size in two, but the muscles that open the mouth are comparatively weak, and it's easy to hold the mouth closed. So the guard, scrabbling at Will Hawklane with its clever tiny hands, whimpered and died, and sounded no alarm.

Panting and exultant, Will Hawklane came back. "Help me drag this thing inside." Well, I helped him. And I thought, how can I tell him, without making him unhappy, that he had just done the worst possible thing he could do? Zados don't make people unhappy. How could I tell him that if he had let himself be captured, he would have been taken to the commander on the bridge, where we might be able to do something, but that now he

has killed a guard, the other guards would bite his silly brave head off? How could I tell him that the most important thing of all was for the Little John not to be discovered, that he couldn't now be detected except if he were seen, and guards looking for their missing meercath would certainly see him? I couldn't say it. I couldn't say it. He was so smiling and proud.

"Will," I said, trying so hard to be gentle, "See Jonna there." And when he looked I threw the shield around her and she was gone. He gaped and took a step toward where she had been and I took the shield away. "See Little John Five." And I threw the shield around Five and then removed it and put it around Will Hawklane. "Will," I said, "you can see Jonna. You can see me. You can see Five. But they can't see you. Is that right, Jonna? Five?" They nodded their heads and I took down the shield.

"Why are you talking to me as if I were a child?" Will Hawklane asked, so maybe my gentling did not work as well as I thought it would.

I said, "We are going to use the shield. And I want you to understand that no matter how close you come to anyone, *they can't see you*. No matter how much you want to attack one of them, you must not. We are going out there and find a search party searching, and we are going to put Little John Five into some place they have just searched, because he has work to do and they can't detect him anymore. And then the three of us are going to the bridge where the commander is, and we are going to do it without getting our legs torn off and our heads bitten by them. Do you understand?"

"You're still talking to me as if I were a child," said Will Hawklane.

"Well," I said, "I love children. Let's go."

I opened the door and put up a shield big enough for all of us. We could see no meercaths but we could hear sounds to the left, snuffling and stamping. I waved them to follow (we could see each other inside the shield) and we went that way. Sure enough there was a squad of meercaths right around the corner, opening and closing doors. We stayed close to the wall and moved right down on them, and I don't think the three Earthers really and truly believed in the shield until this moment. One by one the meercaths passed us as we stepped quietly out of their way, until they were gone.

I opened a door. "In you go, Five. Tell me when it's all done."

He smiled. This was the first time I ever saw a Little John smile. "I will," he said and closed the door.

The Little John had given me the cruiser's own computer picture of the big jug, and I had it well in my head. It was huge and a lot more complicated than it had to be, and it was full of machines and inventions and ups and throughs. And meercaths.

The bridge was way down in the middle of the cruiser with layers and layers of shells within shells all around it that could be sealed off, one from another, in case the big dark cruiser was damaged in space. The bridge was a sort of metal cave all studded with the pictures given it by the computer—pictures from the see-outs, the feel-outs, the how-fasts, how-soons, where-are-we's, and so on—and big ugly meercaths watching them. On a high place in the middle stood the commander, a special meercath, extra big.

Invisible under the shield, we stepped past the guard at the bottom of the ramp up to the high place, and went and stood behind the commander. We watched for a while, how he did the things a commander does to make a cruiser go. Mostly it was sticking out the tummy and looking fierce at one after another of the meercaths who were actually doing something.

From the compartment deep inside the cruiser where we had hidden him, Little John Five mindspoke me: *"I'm all finished, Althair."* It was a very weary mindspeak.

So I took the shield off Will Hawklane and Jonna Verret. But I kept mine.

You know, it seemed like forever that they stood there in plain sight, not knowing that they could be seen, while the commander strutted back and forth, not knowing they were there. Then one of the meercaths tending the little lights glanced up at the command post, froze for a second, and slowly stood up off his tail. (Meercaths sit on their tails.) Then another glanced, stared, and rose, and another. They began a funny little murmur among them, as if they were afraid to say anything to the commander.

And oh, it seemed like such a long while before the commander thought to look behind him, and there were Will Hawklane and Jonna Verret looking him in the eye and smiling, quite used by now to being invisible, and not knowing they were not.

The commander's huge mouth slowly came open, and slowly he raised his little right hand, and he pointed a claw at Jonna. He said, in Earth talk: "You! You! You're the one who disappeared!" And only then did she realize she could be seen. "Althair! Althair!" she cried, but I didn't say anything. Will Hawkline sidled in front of her, maybe thinking he was still invisible, maybe thinking he could protect her or attack the commander, maybe both; but the commander made it clear he could see him too. His pointing claw swung toward Will Hawkline. "You! I saw your picture from Earth. The Time Center ... you're the Coordinator. You're Will Hawkline!" He whirled around and yelled, "This is what we want! He has the back-time invention in his head! Detonate the planet! Destroy Earth!"

"Oh ... Althair!" Jonna's soft hurt cry was the last thing I heard as the cruiser hung over Earth and a meercath slammed his hand down on the planet-smashing control.

There was a spiraling whirl and a blink of black, and a staggering, sickening feeling like traveling in zero time.

It was traveling in zero time.

And the terrible lightnings stroked out from the cruiser, red from this side, blue from that, green from below and a terrible yellow from above, and they met in a river of coruscating white as they plunged into the heart of the planet below, cracked it, kindled it, scorched and exploded it and turned it into a furious little star.

And the planet was Orel, and with it went the Mindpod, whoever they were, and never again would they move through the worlds, taking and killing.

But oh! my pups, my pammies: Oh! I stood with the Earth people and felt drowned in color and I couldn't breathe for shock and sorrow. Yes, the Mindpod was gone, and no, they would no longer menace us, or Earth, or anyone else: but oh, Orel and its little animals, its brave grass and the swirls and swarms of life in its seas; any hope it might have to evolve and grow, gone, gone forever from the universe. Oh yes, there are lots more worlds and lots more life, but sometimes, when you have done a good thing, you have to look at all of the good thing, and wonder forever if there couldn't have been a better way, a way wherein nothing died.

We watched the death of Orel, all of Orel, layer after layer

boiling and swirling; lava, explosions of gas, torn mountains, insane winds and oceans flowing into space. Never mind the Mindpod; never mind the meercaths; I cried for a world and all the life on that world, which can never be known again except in memory.

Meercaths ... what of the meercaths? If I found myself heart-torn and shaking at the sight, what of the meercaths who had to watch their own home dying like that?

I looked around, and ... and ... and an incredible something else happened. With the death of the Mindpod, all of the meercaths in the cruiser disappeared. For each there was a little *pop!* of vacuum as they ceased to exist, and we understood at last that each was a projection, a solid projection, of a real meercath on the planet; and when they were gone, the projections were gone too.

I mindspoke: "Thank you, Little John Five." And the answer came back, "Can I sleep now?"

"Sleep, my friend."

I dropped the shield. They looked at me, Jonna and Will, as if they did not know what to say to me.

I said, "I know I gave you a bad time for a while. I needed to get you to the bridge without your getting killed on the way; I needed to have the commander see you and think he had you captured; it was the one thing which would make him smash the planet, and do it before he could find out what Little John Five had done."

"Five! Where is Five? What did he do?"

"Something neither you nor I could have done. All the orders on a big jug like this come through the computer. The commander's orders were meant to be: *Detonate the planet. Return to Orel.* Little John Five thought himself into the computer and made the orders go: *Return to Orel. Detonate the planet...* He's asleep, down there where we left him. Let him sleep. He's already set your course for Earth. Just touch that little light over there—yes, the green one—and off you'll go. But don't forget to message ahead. Earth may smash this cruiser the moment they detect it."

"Will you come with us?"

"Oh my no," I said. "I have something to do at home. Will," I said suddenly, because I couldn't help myself, "You learned acceptance ... almost ... try learning it the rest of the way. Take

your time. The little green light will wait.”

They stood looking into each other’s eyes for a long while, and I could see it happening: first his acceptance of what she felt, and the beginnings of his acceptance of what he felt. I called on the mindnet and went home. I had a story to tell.

He was sleek and he was furry; he was totally amphibious, and Althair the Adventurer was what he really was. However, he was known on his lovely planet Ceer, as Althair the Storyteller just because he did that better—better even than adventuring.

Story time was over. Slithering lithe, surfing, sliding, inchworming, cracklywhiskered, beady-bright, soft and smooth and shining, went the young, back to the ocean, back to sleepy-couches in the living living-places. I’ll be Althair! they would play tomorrow: I’ll be Jonna, I’ll be Will. This is myth aborning, this, what myth is for.

The Country of Afterward

“Those bastards,” said Mr. Michaelmas, “will knuckle under or so help me, I’ll have their goddamn plant burned down to the ground.”

Joe Flagg looked nervously across the big boardroom, where the opposition was huddled around their accountant.

“They’ll hear us,” he cautioned unnecessarily; there were chances a man like Michaelmas just wouldn’t take. Then: “Why be so hard-nosed, Mike? We can carry them for a long time with the stock we already hold and never feel it ... at least until they get their new line out. They have a hell of a process there.”

“I told you, don’t call me Mike. Hell of a process, yes, and they’re using it for what? Museum reproductions, for God’s sake! They will release that stock, they will give us control, we will shut them down, we will take that process, and we will make toilet seats. That is the way it will go, Mister Flagg, and if it doesn’t, we will blow them away.”

At his own peril, Joe Flagg ignored the “Mister”—a danger signal. “You’re costing a lot of good people a lot of jobs, you know.”

Mr. Michaelmas took a gold key out of his business pocket. “I’m going to take a piss, Flagg. Hold onto the thought that while I’m in there I am pissing on your bleeding heart.” Teeth closing on his lower lip, Joe Flagg watched the Chairman of the Board head for his personal private restroom.

Mr. Michaelmas always enjoyed the effect of the self-closing door of his restroom—silent, solid, certain, with the pulse of pressure in his eardrums accompanying the discrete click of the latch. It suited his taste for impregnability, just as it suited him to churn up as many noisy suds as he cared to with the conviction that nothing could be heard outside.

These very suds utterly concealed the faint whisper of a shower curtain, so that his first knowledge that he was not alone came when a velvet-cool hand slipped up between his legs and enclosed his penis, and a cool, velvet voice said, “Nice. Very

nice.”

Mr. Michaelmas stood transfixed for moment, watching a blaze of shock behind his eyes. The moment lasted long enough for two fondles and a squeeze from the little hand before he could turn around.

As he turned, she rose from her one knee and stood against him smiling—a long-eyed girl with a fine fall of hair.

He gasped, “*Who the hell are you?*”

“Apricot,” she said; and her skin was peach, and she wore a yellow dress, but indeed her hair was apricot. She slid a hand up and around to the nape of his neck, and so great was the shock that he hardly felt the tiny scratch there; and she flung both arms tight around him and held him with his arms trapped against the sides. He tried to inhale to shout, but she anticipated him with a powerful squeeze, so that all that came out was a hoarse “What the hell is this?”

She tipped her head back so he could see her smiling face. “This is a kidnapping, Mr. Michaelmas.” He tried to struggle, whimpering, and found to his horror that his efforts were noticeably weaker. He began to feel the scratch on the back of his neck, and from it, increasing waves of nausea and weakness, matching his pounding pulse. With an enchanting quirk at one corner of her mouth, Apricot said, “You are about to experience two perfect snatches, Mr. Michaelmas: yours, and mine.”

She swung him around like an oversized doll, propped him against the wall and confidently released him. Holding his sagging body upright with one firm elbow in his solar plexus, she produced a plastic glove from her cleavage and worked it over her left hand. With this she reached over his head and turned the T-handle of the window latch.

The heavy steel-framed window, hinged at the top, swung open a little; she caught it and drew toward her, and immediately two leather loops fell into the room and dangled. On one of these hung a broad leather belt. This she removed and draped over her shoulder. She put one of Mr. Michaelmas’s now flaccid arms through a leather loop, then the other. Then she passed the belt behind him and cinched it tight around his body and upper arms. She gave two sharp tugs to one of the loops, and Mr. Michaelmas instantly began to rise. Apricot with one hand considerably held the window wide as he passed up through it. With her other

hand, and with equal consideration, she zipped up his fly as it went by.

In a moment one of the leather slings fell back into the room. Apricot took a turn around her left wrist and let herself be drawn up and out through the window, which she lofted with her foot as she emerged. It swung up and then down, latching with the same solid click as that which Mr. Michaelmas had so much admired.

In a strange place a concentric Mr. Michaelmas was afloat.

The licking began almost immediately. It was part of everything, underlay everything; it was the ambience of being there asleep and awake (as much awake as he was permitted, at first, to be). A long froth of gold across his chest and stomach. A soft rope of brown, a sentient halo of auburn, and again the gold, again the brown, and from time to time the apricot. How count the hours of a dream—and why?

Murmurs, in and out. “Load him with the C—six thousand or better. Time release.” “Twelve patches should cover the spectrum for now.” “It’s a good one. How can a man let himself dry up like that? Erectile response not twenty percent of norm!” “Blood sugar too low. Blood pressure too high. No wonder.” “Increased niacin 20 migs twice a day until you get a rush. Talk about deficiency ...!”

Hours and hours, asleep and a little awake, the licking went on. It felt good.

Visuals. In a dream one could ignore bare breasts and soft female laughter and a sense of caring in mysterious utterances like “Up the E four hundred IU and pack in that ginseng.” The frequent tender face framed in apricot, cool hand on stubbled cheek. Bright attentive eyes, close and closer, sometimes brown, often green, huge finally and lost in a presbyotic haze as they fall half-hooded and become tactile instead of visual: soft lips against his lips, smooth cheek against his growing stubble.

Growing stubble. How long? Who knows? Who cares! Oh, but it feels good....

Murmur murmur. “Wasserman neg. Gonococci neg. Anaphylaxis neg, except guess what? He’s mildly allergic to horses.” “So guess what? We’re fresh out of horses around here.” “Did you say ‘horse’ or ‘whores’?” Tickle of laughter: female, four, five.

Head lifted and cradled; woman-smell. Thick warm soup, delicious, overtone of something ... medicine? Thiamine? She wiped his lips with a nipple....

Night. The sleep had been different somehow; unforced. There was a long, soft body beside him in the bed. Over them in a warm room, only a sheet. Soft fingers holding his genitals, gentle, firm, barely pulsating. Cool, velvet voice calling quietly: "Pam ..."

Half awake. Two thirds awake. Sheet drawn aside, a gentle cloud of dark, soft silk descending on his stomach and chest, and, oh, lips enclosing the head of his penis while the hand slid downward, a knowing finger pressing on the firm flesh underneath his scrotum, pressing, pressing, while the lips and tongue, the tongue, the lips and tongue ...

It came up like pain. It wasn't pain, but it was like that; a flood with a bead leading it, a seed pushed up through a slender pipe. The lips, the tongue, sucked and flicked; warm arms slipped tight around him; other lips surrounded his, and another tongue slipped into his mouth and battled his. The traveling bead approached, exploded outward, and Michaelmas uttered a succession of barks, gasping barks, while coruscations of light sprinkled the inside of his eyes. Then everything began comfortably to fade. The lips around his penis stilled, held for a while (thank God they had stopped moving; he could not have borne the intensity) and slipped away. The arms around him became gentle; the tongue withdrew from his mouth, though the lips remained on his until his breath quieted, matched the warm currents of the woman who held him.

His vision cleared. He lay on a broad, firm bed, and the woman beside him was Apricot. He didn't have enough tonus left in his drained body to react or to move. All he could do was speak; all he could say was, "Where am I?"

"You are in the Country of Afterward. The very best place in all the world. How do you feel?"

He closed his eyes to consider this, and felt himself rushing so swiftly into total sleep that he snapped them open again. "Who are you?"

"You remember me. Apricot. And this is Pam. She just made you come."

"Finally," said Pam; but she said it kindly, smiling. She patted and stroked his now shrunken penis affectionately, and then, as if

reading the distress from his mind, drew the sheet over it. She pulled up her leg, placed one foot on the edge, rested her chin on the knee and smiled at him. She looked absolutely beautiful. He wrenched his gaze away from her and found that this made him look directly at Apricot, who had now withdrawn from him and was propped up on one elbow, her cascade of extraordinary hair flung back and to the side, not quite covering her breasts and permitting a firm little nipple to peer through its curtain. Mr. Michaelmas said, "You! You kidnapped me!"

"That we did," she assured him cheerfully.

"You're not to get away with it, you know."

"Honey" (and it was said as a real endearment), "we *did* get away with it."

"You know what I mean. These days there's a thousand ways to track you down and nail you. The instant you demand the money, you've lost, don't you know that?"

"Demand what money?"

"What else would you be kidnapping people for?"

"You'll find out," said Apricot sweetly.

Mr. Michaelmas tried to sit up, but the movement was met immediately by Apricot's rolling toward him, her breasts against his chest. Mr. Michaelmas struggled weakly and uselessly and spit out, "Damn you bitches, you let me the hell out of—" and was then muzzled, muffled, silenced by the soft lips surrounding his.

"You know, Ape," he heard the lovely Pam say, "that's not the kind of talk we tolerate in the Country of Afterward."

Apricot lifted her mouth away from his long enough to say, "you're right, Pam," and came back to him again. He was appalled to find the sheet withdrawn from his lower body, to feel the soft, dark mist of hair flung across his belly, to feel Pam's mouth around his limpness, drawing him in entire. He twisted away from Apricot, crying, "What are you doing? What are you doing?"

Holding him close, her voice soft and cool and fond as ever, she told him: "We're making you come again."

"You can't!"

"Why ever not?"

"I just did!"

"So?"

"I'm fifty-eight years old!" he howled.

“So?”

Exasperated, he fell into a sullen silence. Apricot shifted her weight and got an arm under her shoulders. She lowered her head to his chest. “You’d be astonished,” she said conversationally, “how few women know and appreciate the fact that a man has nipples.” And she began to tongue them, one and then the other, nip them ever so gently, suck and stroke them. The sensation was amazing, unnerving, quite unlike anything he had experienced in all his life before; it was almost pain; it was enough, for a while to distract his attention from the expert application of Pam’s mouth down below. Left to its own devices, and temporarily freed from the attention of his inhibitions, his astonished penis found itself: too long to be swallowed whole.

His eyes closed, and this time there was no rush to sleep. He tried to speak, to think, and found both less possible with every breath he drew. And the breaths came more swiftly and deeper, and he became aware of something he had forgotten, oh, years ago ... or had he only dreamed it? He couldn’t remember, but it was the knowledge that the woman with him was feeling his currents, his surges. What little sex he allowed himself in his later years—before he had given it up altogether—had been his concern, and not that of the female he happened to be penetrating; but there’d been a time ... hadn’t there? Hadn’t there?... when he took joy, took pride in the knowledge that he was pleasuring a woman. Now, now, here and now and real, Apricot was trembling with him, sharing a rising current with him, breathing as he deeply breathed, her breath now rustling, now becoming whispered moans.

And Pam, Pam now working hungrily, thirsting, faster and harder; Pam cried out with a call almost unheard from her busy mouth, but a cry sending its vibrations into and through him to his incredibly rigid, incredibly pulsing rod. Absolutely without his command, his pelvis began thrusting.

“Now!” Apricot gasped, and as if choreographed, Pam withdrew and Apricot rolled completely on top of him, and he found himself plunged deep inside her. His thrusting would not stop, and hers matched and met his strongly; suddenly she reared up, her eyes closed and her mouth in a vertical oval, and she cried out hoarsely, a sound absolutely unlike any he had yet heard from her; and his penis was clutched, released and clutched,

clutched again, powerful as a hand, smooth as a predawn lake; and he peaked, they cried out together, and again, and again, and, tenderly less, again, and once more, pleasant and light as the briefest smile, and then a long slide into panting quiet. The cords in his inner thighs thrummed with reaction; the calves of his leg would have knotted had they had the strength; even the soles of his feet tingled.

When he was still, Apricot rolled off him, and the withdrawal wakened him with a gasp. She pulled up a corner of the sheet and wiped the sweat off his brow and cheeks and, gently, his eyelids; it felt good. "This is the Country of Afterward, again," she whispered to him, the echoes of her own panting still in her voice. "There's no place here for anger or meanness or fear. Think about this, and sleep now. Sleep."

All but a dim night-light went out. Mr. Michaelmas heard: "Night, Pammy." And when he turned on his side, he felt Apricot at his back, fitting shin to calf, knee to knee, an arm around his chest, and the small strong hand spread there, comforting. He slept.

It must have been hours, for he felt totally rested; yet the room was the same, the same dim night-light from somewhere. (But how count time in a dream?—and why?) And there was a new woman in bed with him, larger, stronger, fuller. Somehow he had reversed positions during his sleep, and he lay at her back, nested like spoons, with his arm around her, and his hand up between her breasts. She smelled good.

He was so rested and so comfortable that he forgot for a measureless instant to be afraid, indignant, even to wonder. He must have made some small movement, because her hand slipped over his and moved it to cup her nipple. She sighed and, lying very still, he felt the nipple increasing in his palm. The fear and indignation and demand were manifest, down there somewhere, but he would not, for this moment, permit that to matter. What mattered was lying still and warm and rested, appreciating this almost motionless movement, the erection of a nipple in his palm.

With amazement and delight he became aware that his own erection was matching hers. *I'm fifty-eight years old!* but: So? And how long had it been since his last explosion? Surely not very long; but, then, there was no time in this place, and if it'd been

only a short time, too short time ago to make another one possible, that seemed not to matter any more than the numbers attached to the years he lived. *So?...*

Mistrusting his own evidence, he felt the urge to reach down and feel himself to be sure was true; and oh, and oh! it was true. And when she felt his movement, the woman flung back the covers and spun around, rising—a beautiful movement that ended with her seated on his groin with most of her weight carried by her knees, and his penis buried deep inside her. He looked up at her; she was magnificent rearing up, with a muscled torso and firm breasts, the nipples standing out proud; she threw back her head atop its strong column of neck, her teeth gleamed, and she climaxed immediately. He had never seen or felt anything quite so marvelous.

There is that in all humans which captures an experience in all its aspects, sight, sound, sensation, indelibly; and Mr. Michaelmas knew in this moment he had a memory, a nested jewel in his personal treasure chest, which would far outlast any tangible thing he had ever owned, and which, unlike stocks and bonds and country houses (or, for that matter, a welfare check, should he ever come to that) could never, never be taken from him.

Three times she moved, up and down; then, throwing her head from side to side and crying out, she came again, with a series of spastic contractions so powerful that she ejected his penis, which she quickly recaptured and then was still, so that he might feel her cascading aftershocks. She bent forward and locked his eyes with her own, while her face became smooth, almost flat, and she began to move again. The smooth, oiled pressure of her vagina increased steadily as she approached another climax; breathless, almost awed, pinned by the intensity of those eyes, he felt his own currents rising in response to hers. Her mouth twisted, her eyes screwed shut, back went her head, and she howled and she came, *and so did he*, oh, and so did he!

Gasping, she slid her knees down and out from under her and fell weakly on top of him, driving the wind out of his laboring lungs, rolled to the side against him, panting and smiling and sharing his breath.

It was hardly a conscious movement, but he put an arm around her, and she shifted until their bodies fit and they quieted together, reading each other's eyes in the dimness. He could feel

the thud of her heart. In time they slipped unmoving into a quiet space, not sleeping, not awake either: just being.

After time (in this place where there was no time) she sighed and sat up. She hit a switch somewhere, and an oval of light etched itself on the bed from a floor lamp nearby. "Look," she said. "Look at this." She raised herself with her legs wide apart and the light flooding down on her crotch. "Did you ever really look at one of these?"

He never had; never, certainly, on a black woman before. The hair was thick and blue-black and, in the center, divided on an area of a red quite surprising in its intensity. She began to speak, her strong slender fingers moving from time to time in demonstration. Her voice was full and rich, and her diction faultless.

She said: "This is the beginning; this is where it all starts—life and joy and all the things that come from both of them. Look at it; look here: I read of a little girl who saw a picture of it and said 'Oh, it's just like a flower!' and indeed it is; see the petals here and there? See how it folds into itself?

"See the wetness, yours and mine together. I honor the wetnesses of the body, especially when they come from loving, and most especially when they're mingled. Your sweat is drying on me, and mine on you, and I think that is just beautiful.

"Look. Look. Look at the shape of it. Forget for a moment what it is, and just draw in your mind the shape of it. Do you see there the shape of the arch, the Gothic arch you'll find in the great old cathedrals? Do you recall how many of them surmount and surround those gorgeous round rose windows, exploding with all the colors there are, and with all the light God and man can pour through them, each in his turn? If you think for a moment, man, that I'm irreverent when I make this comparison, or that I'm out to destroy worship and holiness, you've got me all wrong. I believe with all my heart that God made us as He would have us be, and that when we make joy with what He gave us, we praise Him for His good works. I think the idea of such praise began long before there was a church, any church, and that this special joy and the act of worship were once the same thing, and that they were driven apart by dried-up old men who had lost the joy and found a way to substitute power for it—earthly power, not heavenly power.

“Look! You are looking at the gates to heaven, not the gates to hell! You are looking at an altar, man, at which you can worship a woman and through her Woman with a capital letter: all life and all joy.

“Then if you can learn to think of all this in this special way, go outside a cathedral and look up, and if you can’t see the symbolism of those strong stretching columns and towers and steeples reaching toward God, then I do indeed pity you.

“When a man gets horny and needs his ashes hauled and drives in here and dumps them, he commits a sacrilege. When a man stabs in here with a rape, he violates the intention of God who made him. When he comes to it with joy and reverence, he worships. And if he comes to it with love—man, he has it all.”

“I never ...” Mr. Michaelmas started to say, but it wouldn’t come out as words; it was a speechless mumble. He went his lips and tried again. “I’ve never heard anyone talk like that.” He lay relaxed, looking at the curves and petals in their oval of light.

The overhead lights came on, not at all harshly, and the woman’s hand descended on his shoulder, carrying the clear message: *You needn’t move*; not *Don’t*—just *You needn’t*, a message so clear and strong that he did not even start, even when Apricot’s clear, cool voice said, “Let’s eat!”

He glanced up. Apricot and the dark-haired girl Pam were pushing a wheeled table toward the bed. They were both naked and completely at peace in their nudity. Apricot moved around in front of the table (from which fragrances animated that made his salivaries squirt).

“Let’s eat.”

He sat up, and he was ravenous. Fluffy yellow omelets, stuffed with mushrooms and with an incredible orange sauce; a pyramid of filet mignon in little cubes, quite raw, and tender as a serenade; a dark bread, obviously homemade with an elusive smoky overflavor; four kinds of cheese, passion fruit and (of course) apricot nectars, a green tea and a wonderful black coffee. “Lord! You can cook!”

“We didn’t do this one; it was Rorie. She’ll be along any minute.”

“Rorie. She’s the one with the ah—”

“The fuzzhead. That’s right. And your latest conquest there is Rietta. She is our resident God-freak.”

To his surprise, Mr. Michaelmas felt mildly defensive.

"I don't think she's any kind of freak."

"Well, bless your thing," cried Rietta, and kissed his ear.

Mr. Michaelmas felt himself flushing with pleasure. He was amazed.

Rorie, the one with the halo of pale, fine hair, appeared, a girl so perfectly proportioned and so graceful in her carriage and movements that it was easy to notice, last of all, that she was over six feet tall.

"Mr. Michaelmas says, if you could marry, he'd cook you," said Pam.

"Well, thank you," said Rorie graciously, and sat on the edge of the big bed, looking at him with frank and open liking.

They ate companionably and, without being fussy about it, they all saw that Mr. Michaelmas had everything he wanted a second or two before he knew he wanted it, while good talk rolled and swirled around the group. He learned that Pam was a registered nurse with a degree in biochemistry, Rietta ("It used to be Henrietta, but women's lib got that far into my name. A hen I ain't.") had an M.D. and that Rorie—Aurora—was a pharmacist.

"I'm a high school dropout," said Apricot, "with a libido I insist is normal and maybe a little more *chutzpah* than most. I rounded up these three in the same hospital."

"It was a veterans' hospital," said Rietta. "Apricot blew in one day to visit her girlfriend's boyfriend who lost an argument with a grenade."

"He was a double amputee with half a face," said Apricot, "and nobody was lining up on both sides of the street, cheering like they did when he marched off to war. Hardly anybody ever drops in to chat with those guys, and when they do, they take care of their brains or the boredom or their immortal souls, but they pay damn little attention to their gonads. A lot of them, there's nothing wrong with their gonads. So, well," she shrugged, "I did something about it."

"Did she ever," said Rorie admiringly. "She recruited a whole detachment of us. Next thing you know there were flying squads of us visiting hospitals all over."

"You mean they—you ..." Four nodding heads answered him. "What about the administration?"

"We're not stupid," said Rietta, "and don't forget—we know the

rules. Mostly, administration didn't know what was going on, which is SOP for administration everywhere. Once in awhile there was a ripple, but we found most of 'em willing to look the other way as long as we could assure them that they wouldn't have to take any heat. It worked beautifully right up until—"

"Never mind the details," Apricot said quickly, and then laughed. "Let's just say we ran up against a front-office type with a small mind and desiccated scrotum who apparently felt that decency, morality and frustration was the proper environment for his veterans. We saw it coming and quietly removed him. We gave him a full treatment and put him back where we found him, and to this day he's got as happy a population as you can find any hospital—which is never very.

"Our first case," said Aurora, smiling reminiscently.

Case? Am I a "case"? Mr. Michaelmas looked around him at the four relaxed, pleasantly smiling woman, and past them at the room.

Timeless. Large, carpeted in neutral gray with a warm blush to it, and the walls were draped—all of them. No sign of windows; there must have been doors, because the women came and went, but from where he sat on the huge square bed, there was no way of telling where a door might have been. None of the girls wore watches; the light was artificial; there was no radio, no TV.

Timeless.

Abruptly, he demanded, "How long have I been here?"

Pam looked at him searchingly. Rorie uncrossed her long legs. Apricot looked across him at Rietta and asked, "How long would you say?"

Rietta looked pensively at the ceiling for a moment. "Fifty, fifty-five minutes maybe."

Mr. Michaelmas looked at each in turn, and got smiles. "I don't know what you mean," he said levelly.

"I mean fifty-five minutes or so in the Country of Afterward," said Rietta. "Nothing else matters here."

"Well, goddammit, it matters to me!"

"I really don't like that kind of talk," said Rietta. Clearly, she meant it. "I guess he's out."

"Seem so," said Rorie, rising like a swift flower in stop-motion; and the next thing Mr. Michaelmas knew he was hit in four complex ways from four directions, and sank under a

choreographed tangle of soft, strong, skilled limbs and torsos.

In the next timeless time, two things utterly astonished Mr. Michaelmas. The first was that after a few minutes of intense battle, *he laughed*. Mr. Michaelmas laughed! A great peal of unexpected, uncontrollable laughter, coming from a place where no real laughter had lived for years!

The other thing was that, one way or another, he brought off all four women. The ways, and the other ways, cascaded over him, presented themselves, demanded themselves, created their own hungers and urgent demands.

Then his own incredible peak and eruption flung him away into sleep.

He woke alone and, realizing it, felt a vague sense of pique, of abandonment. He moved, and was aware of the warmth of the bed beside him, and understood that he hadn't been alone after all; he probably awakened because she had silently slipped away. (She? Which she?) Now he came all the way awake and sat up. He was more alert than he had yet been, here—almost normally so. To be awake, and alone, was something of a novelty in this cave of novelties.

He slipped off the bed and fell pleasure as his bare feet took his weight. The carpeting was resilient, crisply but pleasantly tickling. He moved silently to the draped wall and put his hand against it, pressed, felt nothing back of it but a solid surface. He paused, then, hand over hand, he felt his way all around the room; there had to be an opening, an door, somewhere. And, of course, he found one.

The bathroom.

The light came on automatically as he passed through the just overlapping drape. Not quite angry, not quite laughing at himself, and commanded by his bladder more than by his brain, he used the bathroom “now that I’m here.” And as he emerged, “Wouldn’t you know ...” he said ruefully, for there on the edge of the bed sat the long limbed Aurora, wheeled table alongside, pouring coffee. Not for the first time he was struck by her beauty: how could anyone so tall be so perfect? The cup, the saucer, the coffee pot seemed like doll furniture in her long, tapered hands. And she smiled at him, set down the coffee, and rose to meet him halfway, put her arms around him, pressed him to her wonderful body,

held him, released him. "I'm glad you're still here," she said.

"Where else would I be?"

"Wherever it is you go when you leave—"

"I know, I know. 'The Country of Afterward.' When are you going to give me a straight answer about that?" And he felt a flick of astonishment at hearing himself, for though the words were those of the crabby and testy Michaelmas, the tone was, for him, something new. The cutting edge wasn't there. Rorie captured his eyes with hers for a moment; her face flicked from profound seriousness to a radiant smile, as if she had found something she hoped for. "That's exactly why I came in just now—to give you answers. Come sit by me."

They perched together on the edge of the huge bed. The table was a vase, the food a bouquet: yellow rice, tiny green peas, scarlet pimentos, orange-pink lobster meat, blue-black mussels, white chicken, mother-of-pearl inside the just-burst, juicy clams.

"I'll tell you a story," said Rorie, around and between her food. "Maybe you've read it, maybe you know it, but let me tell you anyway, because I have a point to make.

"It's in Victor Hugo's big novel *Les Misérables*, and is one of the finest pieces of writing anywhere in this world. It deals with a sailing ship, a French naval vessel and a terrible storm. The ship had a weather deck, and right under it the gun deck where the cannons were kept. They were tied down behind the gun ports, ready to be run out and used in battle. Big brass cannons, you know, on wheels.

"Well, in the storm one of the cannons got loose, and I'm sorry I don't have the book with me to read you that part; you'd never forget it; you'd think you'd been there. As the ship rolled and plunged in the storm, the cannon was like something alive and crazy, charging up and down across, smashing into the bulkheads, splitting the timbers of the ship's sides, bearing down on crewmen trying to find some way to stop it. It began to look as if that berserk cannon was going to sink the ship and kill everybody.

"Then a young gunnery officer snatched up a long ramrod and ran out to the middle of the gun deck. He was like a dancer, a matador, a prizefighter all at once; and he dodged, and he spun, and he ducked this crazy cannon as it ran at him until he saw his chance, and then he dove under it and shoved the ramrod into

the wheel spokes, stopping the thing in its tracks until the crew could get ropes on it and tie it down.

“Want some more lobster?”

Mr. Michaelmas, munching and agog at the thrum of her voice, shook his head.

She went on:

“Late the next day when the sea was calm, the captain called up the whole crew on the main deck. He and his officers were in full dress. He had the gunnery officer, front and center, and he came down with a medal on a chain, and he decorated the officer and kissed him on both cheeks, the way they do in the French military to this day.

“Then he went back up on the high poop deck and called down a question, ‘Now which man is responsible for that cannon getting loose?’

“And the hero with the shiny decoration on his chest, proud and honest, answered, ‘I was, sir.’

“Then the captain called up the sergeant of marines. ‘Sergeant,’ he said, ‘take that man, and a squad, up to the foredeck and shoot him.’

“And they did.”

Mr. Michaelmas took a while to realize he had stopped chewing. This lady really knew how to tell a story.

“That’s one part of what I have to tell you,” Aurora said. “Push it aside—” (she pushed his plate aside as she said this, and replaced it with a dessert, a whipped and shaped mound of something with real flower petals in it) “—and let me give you another part. They’ll all come together. You’ll see.”

He started to respond, then gave it up. He was beginning to learn (relearn?) that things could happen without his having to make them happen.

The tall girl lay down and rolled over on her stomach, and propped herself up on her elbows. “That Apricot,” she said finally, “she’s crazy, you know, but she’s also some kind of saint. And she—well, she just doesn’t think like other people. The veteran’s hospital bit was only the beginning. Want some more coffee?”

“I’ll get it,” said Mr. Michaelmas. “Go on.”

“She read an article in an old magazine one day. It was a very funny bit, written during one of America’s so-called ‘police

actions' against Communists. This writer had gotten hold of a newspaper story about how much money it cost to kill one of the enemy. He multiplied this by the total body count to date, and came out with a huge figure, which he said would be enough to buy a villa on the Riviera for every family of five in the entire enemy country. He said this would do two things: it would stop the killing, and would knock the hell out of communism."

They laughed together. Aurora said, "That's funny, and it's sharp, but it set Apricot to thinking: Here was an alternative to war, ridiculous as it was. She'd never wondered before if there could be alternatives—who does?

"And that led her to wonder how it was, if there were alternatives, the final choice always seemed to be mass killing. What bothered her most was that in a war a country always screens out the strongest, the quickest, the smartest young men that can be found and sends them out to get their heads blown off.

"And she thought, who makes these decisions? Almost always, old men. 'Old' didn't have to mean years; 'old' means with all the juices dried up. 'Old' means (whether or not they know themselves) that they hate the young just for being young; they are jealous, envious and angry. It's nothing new, you know. The old bulls are always afraid of the young ones coming up. This kind of thing was around before humanity was out of the trees.

"Now here is crazy Apricot deciding to do something about it. If the old ones are sitting safe in front of their acres of polished mahogany, sending the young ones to die with a stroke of their ballpoint pen, then, says Apricot, let's find a way to put the juice back into them. Because she believes that a good little man is as good as a good big man, and a good old man is as good as a good young one. Sometimes better," she added, smiling and reaching to stroke Mr. Michaelmas's thigh.

"Now," she said "*you*. Some men collect companies to make conglomerates. You've been collecting conglomerates. I don't know why—you certainly don't need the money, and you've proved yourself over and over; I don't understand it, and I won't try. But I won't fault you for it. It's your thing, and it's what you have to do.

"But in doing it you became a gold-plated bastard. You got so you didn't care how many faces you walked on with your

climbing cleats on, and then you got so you enjoyed it. You especially enjoyed crunching young people, young enterprise, young ideas.”

“Now, just a damn minute—”

Aurora raised a finger, overriding him. “I’m reading from the record, Mr. Michaelmas. We’ve planned this for you for a long time. And I’m not saying what you are,” she added. “I’m saying what you’ve been.” She rose up on the bed and came to him, pressing him back with one hand while the other sought his groin. “Your juices are running again. You’ve been fed and rested and tuned up, and you’ve been balled to the point where you had all the pleasure you can handle and *have started to give it back*. You know what you did for the four of us. Stiff or limp, fingers, mouth or whatever, you looked out for us all; you wouldn’t quit until you were sure.

“And that’s what the Country of Afterward is all about, Mr. Michaelmas. You take off your clothes to have sex, right? Well, good sex takes off your gender—do you see what I’m saying? It’s the one time when human beings have the chance to meet each other without the old chase, without game-playing and manipulating and tit-grabbing. And it’s the one time when a lot of people—I’m sorry to say mostly men—roll over and go to sleep, leaving the other—usually the women—depressed, even crying and not knowing why.”

Mr. Michaelmas felt very strange. Aurora’s lovely face and brilliant eyes seemed to be coming into sharper and sharper focus, while the rest of the room seemed to be fuzzing out. *What’s the matter with me?*

To his astonishment, Aurora put two fingers in her mouth and produced a short, piercing whistle. Somewhere behind her the drapes billowed, and they all came in—Rietta, Pam, Apricot. He could not move ... and the hand moving in his groin was exquisite. “Must’ve been something I ate,” he mumbled.

“Sure it was,” said Aurora. Her face, her eyes, moved closer; her voice soft and strong, drove into him. “When anybody, young or old, starts showing the signs of being the kind of bastard you were before you came here, you remember that you’re the captain. You’re going to find a phone number in your side jacket pocket (when you have a side jacket pocket). You’re the captain,” she said again, “and you will call that number, but you won’t say

‘take that man out and shoot him.’ You will say ‘take that man out and fuck him.’ And if, when he comes back, he still acts like a bastard, you will call again and say ‘take him out and fuck him again’—which, you will agree, is better than having to shoot him again. Mr. Michaelmas, we are going after bastard captains in government and industry, and we won’t stop until the juices are flowing again all through the summit.”

Apricot vaulted lithely to the bed behind him; lifted his head and put it in her lap. Rietta fitted her strong body to his; Pam flung her dark silk over his torso and smoothed his chest with her cheek. No one hurried. Gently, sensation rose without pausing at any plateau, rose and peaked and gently overflowed, and he fell asleep in the Country of Afterward.

Midmorning. Autumn. Warm. A laughing wind. Traffic. Voices. Mr. Michaelmas opened his eyes; whatever it was that had blacked him out left him with a click. He felt fine, and more alert than he had been in years. He looked across a small park at the front of his own office building.

“Jesus Christ! Mr. Michaelmas!”

“Wrong on the first, right on the second. Hello, Joe.”

Joe Flagg dropped down on the bench next to him. “I got your message that you were out here. Someone phoned. Where were you? I began to think you were never coming back. Even thought you’d been kidnapped, but nobody ever—”

“Been minding the store?”

“I’ve done the best I could, Mr. Michaelmas. Well what I did, I tried to do everything the way you would.”

“Did you, now.”

Flagg began excitedly to recite what he’d done. It went on while they crossed the park, crossed the street, crossed the lobby: foreclose, acquire, outbid, outplay. Freeze, force, pull the rug. Variously, men squealed, ran, turned pale, you should’ve seen his face when I ... By the time they entered the elevator, Flagg had almost run down. Mr. Michaelmas interrupted the last punch line of corporate triumph with “You’ve turned into a gold-plated bastard, Flagg.”

“Thanks. Thanks a lot.”

Well, thought Mr. Michaelmas, *he’s had a good teacher*. They entered his private office from the back corridor; a gamut of

astonished staff was a thing he was not prepared to run. Mr. Michaelmas dropped into his familiar old chair. The convolutions of the old leather seat did not exactly fit his buttocks as they had. Well of course: Flagg had been using it. He looked up at his Number Two Man, who was (a little nervously) picking up things from the desk: a picture, a file of papers, a little clock. "Get this stuff out of your way ... you want me now?"

"Not now."

Flagg backed out. *Backed out*. Was he in the presence of royalty, or did he expect to be shot if he turned around?

Mr. Michaelmas stretched. He felt just fine. He put his hands in his pockets, found his wallet, keys. A card with a phone number. He dialed.

Two rings. "Afterward." An answering machine.

He said, "This is Michaelmas. Tell Apricot the gunnery officer is Joseph Flagg."

Clopclick, and a voice: *this* was no machine saying excitedly, "Mike! Oh, Mike, I hoped it was you! This is Apricot."

He felt, suddenly, like a blushing high-school kid. "Apricot ... Apricot, am I ever going to see you again?"

"You just name it. You really are wonderful, you know."

"Really?"

"Honest to really, Mike."

So he made the date. Then he buzzed Flagg.

"Get in here."

Flagg appeared, his face carefully composed, but his hands holding his hands very hard.

Mr. Michaelmas detached his gold key from the bunch and slid it across the desk. "Have one of these made for yourself. And call me Mike."

He thought Joe Flagg was going to cry. "Yes, sir, Mr. Michaelmas. Thank you, Mr. Michaelmas." He backed out.

Mike, Mr. Michaelmas told himself, feeling the juices run within him, *you really are wonderful, you know. Honest to really*. He leaned back and stretched, feeling the old leather molding again to fit his body, and fell to thinking about his date, and afterward.

Like Yesterday

“Privilege,” murmured Perk. “Truly, an honor and a privilege.” He didn’t know what to do with his hands, so he laid them against his side-seams. This brought him to parade attention, and the old Chief hadn’t ordered it, so he set his shine-to-wincing boots slightly apart. The old Chief hadn’t said “At ease!” either, so he didn’t put the hands behind him. He didn’t know what a stance like this was. He didn’t altogether know what he was, or why he was here. “Having the opportunity,” he said after a while, because the old man was so still, staring, apparently, at his crotch. He thought a hysterical thought about zippers and controlled the impulse to check it out with an effort somewhat greater than four hours on the obstacle track might cost him. “All by myself,” he added insanely. “I mean, with you, sir, privilege.”

The old Chief looked up at last, giving a whole new meaning to the words “eye strain.” The cold and deepset eyeballs seemed totally involved in lifting the enormous wattles which hung beneath them, while the uplifted face, the whole head, was equally involved with the weight of chins, which dragged the lower lip away from the lower teeth in the corners of the mouth wetly, pinkly down. This was the famous and terrifying scowl so beloved of hating political cartoonists, two generations of them. There was time for Perk to realize that his crotch, and probably a great deal more about him, had had no part in that apparently fixed stare. The old men had merely been mustering the strength to look up. Yet, because he was the old Chief, nothing was “merely.” He could conquer, he could devastate by lifting his face. “Shuddup,” he said. “Siddown!” The twitch of two mottled fingers showed where. Perk was standing, Perk was sitting; it was like matter-transmission, like changing the angle in a film cut, without so much as a click between, and he never could recall the move.

The old Chief turned to face him, not so much his function as that of his swivel chair. Now that their eyes were on a level, the old Chief’s had no work to do but to pour out hatred. They did

not—at least, Perk hoped not—but it was there to do, and they were aimed right at him.

At last: “What did you want to be a cop for?”

“Who, me?” Perk answered stupidly, startled. He broke his gaze away; stupidity seemed able to ignite the hatred. “Well, I, it’s what I’ve always wanted to be, ever since I.” A quick glance at those old eyes stopped him short. He hit his knuckles together in chagrin, and was afraid he was blushing. He was. He said, “To help people. To make it a better place, the city. To teach folks it’s right to live by the law, right and easy, and it’s wrong to break the law, long and hard. And then, to keep teaching people, showing people, all the time every day what the law is.”

“Why don’t you tell the truth?”

“Oh, I, but, I—”

“Never mind that now,” the old man cut him off. “You probably don’t even know the truth.” He paused, then said with immense weight, “But you will.... What do you do on your duty tour every day? Oh God,” he blurted, interrupting before Perk could speak, “I don’t mean you control traffic when the game breaks up, so the dumbheads don’t kill each other driving manual between the gates and the radarway. I don’t mean you find a little girl’s kitten or bring in a case of clap the medics have traced and nailed for you, or call for a freeze because you think a street fight could start.”

“Well, that’s police work,” said Perk, a little defensively; then, “Sir—Chief! What’s the matter? Are you all, shall I—”

“I’m trying to keep from throwing up. You know, you really make me sick. Don’t take it personal. You don’t know no better, not yet, but what I hear talk like that my stomach wrenches and I gag.” He made some heavy, whistling breaths, while Perk debated whether or not to apologize. *Don’t take it personal*. Well all right. He waited.

“Put it this way. A citizen has a go-round with his chick, splits her face clear down to the tits with a cleaver. What’s the procedure?”

“Her ID signals the precinct, condition yellow, peak violence, and if the computer shows vital signs failing, we get condition red. We know who she is and where she is. We cordon, Stage One, five hundred meters. We close the cordon. Anything unusual, any resistance, we freeze the area.”

“Everyone lies down sleepy.”

“Yes, sir. Then we move to the scene and enter.”

“No warrant.”

“*Hightower vs. Dayton, Ohio*, 2019, Supreme Court. ID notification of the precinct constitutes a warrant for search.”

“Did your homework, huh. What next?”

“On entering, and discovering evidence of assault, which we always do, we use the police key on the mobe.”

“You know why it’s called the mobe?”

“Yes, sir. From Möbius, 19th-century German mathematician, who devised the moebius strip. The mobe is a scanner which is installed, as many as necessary, to cover all enclosures, public and private, and most thoroughfares. It records and retains audio and video for twelve hours before it recycles. The police key stops and opens it for the record of events leading up to the crime, for use in court.”

“What about the Fifth Amendment—self-incrimination? Right of privacy, all that?”

“Completely protected, sir, *Arkwright vs. Thorndale, Miss.*, 2022. Surveillance after the fact, even of events before the fact, takes on the nature of detective investigation.”

“All right, all right. So what about your murderer?”

“With his picture and voice-prints, we have identification. If we’ve frozen the area, he’ll be in it somewhere. If not we’ll pick him up the minute he uses his ID to make a purchase, or says a single word in a public or private place. As a fugitive he has no civil rights, and the warrant to search for him is valid wherever the computer locates him.”

“All right, no more, I’m going to throw up for sure. So. Radar keeps the cars apart, the freeze and the mobe gets your murderers, molesters, vandals, and thieves, and you—when you’re not directing traffic in the parking lot at the ballpark, or finding the little lost dogs—you trot down trails the goddam computer marks out for you. And that’s police work. Why did you want to be a cop?” He shouted it.

Startled, Perk shouted back, “I told you!” Then to those eyes, he added, “Sir.” Then, to more of the same, he murmured, “Well, gosh, I thought I did.”

“Then tell me this. Do they like you?”

“Who—you mean civilians? People? Well, sure. I mean, I guess

so. I mean, why shouldn't they? We help them." He looked up quickly at that cliff of jowls, and away.

"So you joined the cops so people would like you."

"No! No, I mean, that isn't it at all. I just wanted to help!"

With a dreadfully slow, terrifying landslide sort of flow, the old man leaned forward until his elbows reached his knees and the full weight of his great torso came to rest on them. "You are going to be the chief of police here—chief of police in the biggest city in the whole country."

"Me?" Years later, and for all those years, Perk was to cringe at his memory of that moment, and each time he was to wish he had the moment to live over again, for he *squeaked*. "Me?"

"You qualify, down the line. You're the first man I've seen who does. All the years I served, and ever since I retired thirty-four years ago in the year 2000, and mind you, retired or not, I never took my eyes off the force and what's been happening to it, I've been looking for that one man to be the kind of chief I was, yeah, and better."

"Oh no, sir—no! Never that!" Perk was genuinely scandalized.

"Don't you 'no' me, you limp little dick!"

"I'm sorry, sir, I didn't mean ... I mean, I'd like that, more than anything in the world I would, but it's so—so big that I've got to be honest. I'm not the best there is. On my last competence survey I scored eighty-seventh. The time before that I scored forty-sixth. If my next one shows a continued downturn, I'll think about resigning."

"You'll do no such a damn thing. I've been looking for you for fifty years and I ain't got another fifty, let's not kid ourselves. I'm shootin' my wad with you, and you're goin' out of this room today on your way to the top. You're goin' to give this city the kind of police it used to have, if you have to personally make this city what it used to be. Hear?"

"Y-yes sir."

"Okay. Lesson one is why you, and 99 dot four-9s percent of the police wanted on the force, an' what I tell you you will never and I mean by God never, repeat to anybody, most especially a cop. Do you really understand that?"

"Yessir," but it was inaudible. Perk when his lips and tried again. "Yessir."

The old Chief heaved himself upright and folded his forearms,

which was as far as his arms would fold. Out of their caves, the eyes trained downrange like artillery. “From time to time it comes to a man that he wants to straighten other people out, that he was put on the world for that—to see to it that other people toe the mark, and toe it because this man said so. Now a very small handful of them could do it all by themselves, because there was a certain something about them that made folks listen, made folks move.”

“Charisma,” Perk murmured.

“Shut up, I’m talkin’. Mohammed, Marx, Hitler, Gandhi, Jesus, FDR, that feller over there in Hungary I can never say his name right ten, twelve years back. You’re the schoolboy, you know the ones I mean. They could do it and they did, but that thing they had, it comes to one out of dozens of millions. All the rest of it, the wanting to straighten other people out, there’s thousands of them born with that. But when they try to move people like Hitler and Jesus and them, they just get laughed at. So what do they do? They join the police force. Not the Army, the Navy—those guys can to straighten out only other Army and Navy guys. The police, they get to straighten out everybody.” The old Chief raised a heavy forefinger and marked time with his words. “An application to try for the force is an open admission that a man hasn’t got the muscle to do what he wants to do, by himself. His uniform says to the world that he isn’t complete, that he’s some sort of amputee. His club and a side arm and his badge are the muscles he admits he does not have. You got to know that about yourself and about every man and woman from rookie to chief—away down deep they feel impotent and mad that they can’t straighten people out with their own muscle.

“Guys who really want to help—” (he made the word scathing with mimicry) “—wind up in the fire department.” He spat on the carpet.

“If you know that about the force, and if you’re the only one who does, you got a handle on them. You know who to order into what action, you know who has the most to prove and needs to prove it the most. That’s how you make your appointments and promotions, and that’s all you need to handle things inside. But that’s not enough to bring the force back to what it should be.

“What you got to do—and I’m telling you, you are the one that is going to do it—you got to forget if people, I mean that ocean of

dumb-dumbs out there, if they like you or not. Respect you, sure, admire you, sure, but if they all like you, you failed, you've lost the chance to bring back the kind of power we had when there was such a thing as money, I mean the kind you counted out and passed around from hand to hand, and before the IDs with their bio-sensors, and the mobe, and the freeze, and like that. Can't you see what's wrong? *Nobody's afraid of you anymore!* Time was when a highway patrolman stopped the car for a soft tire or failing to signal a lane change—this was before the radar waves—the guy in the car would pull out a gun and blow the cop's head off. And it got so when the guy was stopped on a highway and reached into his pocket for his chewing gum because he was nervous, the cop would blow his head off. Nobody likes to see cops killed, or even civilians, but back then there was always fear, back and forth; people were scared of the cops, the cops were scared of the people. Only, because of that thing I told you about, that kind of amputation, it made the cops tough and mean because it gave them something special to prove. So in those days, sure, cops would find little girl's lost puppy-dogs and all, and when someone you're afraid of does the like of that, they are special, boy, special, and they knew it. And that's what we're going to bring back. What you are going to bring back. Volstead. That mean anything to you?"

Perk had to shake himself. The old man had perhaps more of that thing he claimed was amputated, that charisma, than he realized. "Volstead. The Volstead Act. Eighteenth amendment. It was against the law to manufacture, sell or transport alcoholic beverages."

"Oh, you are the little schoolboy," sneered the old man, but wasn't there a touch of admiration in it? "It was a dumb law—the dumbest part was getting it into the Constitution, because it made everybody who boozed a federal criminal, and when you have millions of people violating one part of the Constitution you can't expect them to take the rest of the real serious. Aside from that it was great. For the first time it gave the law the chance to infiltrate and raid and hire informers and make and take payoffs—move in on the citizens. Sure, the citizens fought back in a lot of ways, from apathy to gun-fighting, but it gave the cops more reach than they had just busting unions and chasing burglars. It couldn't last—the law, I mean, it was too stupid, but by the time

it was repealed the force had a taste of what it was like to walk the beat and see people back off and lam out and sit there worrying till the bull walked by. Marijuana.”

“That’s been legal for forty years.”

“Forty-three,” said the old Chief smugly. Inwardly, Perk decided to be a little less accurate. It did the old man a grain of good to be one up on the schoolboy. “Ah, that was a great time. The greatest of all. Outlawing tobacco was small potatoes compared with the marijuana thing, because by then we were pretty well computerized and had sensors out everywhere, sniffing for tobacco. Marijuana was made to order for law enforcement; honest to God, if you was to draw a blueprint for some one thing that would put pride into that empty place in all cops, it was marijuana—pot, we used to call it. Booze, now, you needed a still and you had to feed it with grain and sugar in big lots, big enough to flag long before you even knew there was a still. Hard drugs and mindbenders, like LSD and DMT, you needed a laboratory and skilled chemists. And the street price got so high that big bundles of money were as easy to notice as big bundles of grain and sugar back in Prohibition days. Prostitution even—that used to be against the law—it had to have a place to happen in some way to contact the public, all the time, every day, every night. But pot, now, it’s a weed, it’ll grow anywhere for anybody, indoors, in the back of the closet with a little UV light. It never did get out-of-sight expensive, and you can carry a couple of sticks around that would make a hell of a lot less bulge than a bottle. It spread like you wouldn’t believe, all over the country, all up and down the income brackets. It was in the poverty belts for the longest time, at first, poor damn drones, it was the only thing most of ’em could afford to hide from their troubles and that was all right with the force, because if there is anywhere you want to lean hard on it’s the poor. A lot of revolutionary stuff starts with them, and stealing and mugging and the like, and it’s a great thing to have something like pot to go cruising for, something cheap and easy to get and you can smell it! Back in the Prohibition days, the biggest killer gangster of them all, name of Campone—”

Perk opened his mouth to correct him, then learningly closed it again.

“—they never got him for anything he ever did except he didn’t

file his income tax, and for that they jailed him. Well, pot in a small way was like that. You may not have anything on a suspect except you don't like his looks, chances are you can pat-and-frisk and come up with some marijuana; one time, before the law eased up, we jailed a guy, he was one of those against-the-war kooks, for three seeds we found in his coat lining! There's another guy, used to preach LSD like a religion, they nailed him in Texas with four ounces of weed, gave him thirty years. That cut down on the preachments a whole heap. You see what I mean.

"Rule two is that the idea some rookies got—maybe you had it, I don't know—that in the long run the police are in the business to eliminate themselves—well, that's just wrong. There was a time when dentists claimed they would teach folks to take such good care of their teeth they'd never need dentists; some doctors used to do the same kind of promo. I'm going to give it to you straight; if ever a time comes when there ain't enough crime around to maintain a police force, somebody will make new crimes, or make something everybody does or eats or drinks or rubs on their belly a crime; but if they don't, it's up to the police to do it. Just don't get caught at it, is all. There's always better ways.

"Pot, now, it was full of better ways. Like in that war we fought in Indo-China, there was all sorts of good grass around there, and when the Army got gung-ho about the soldiers smoking it, some officer sniffing one stick in a whole barracks and handing out dishonorable discharges, the soldiers quit grass, which didn't hurt them, and switched to heroin, which did, just and only because heroin don't smell. This was great for us when those junkies got home, because the stuff they got here wasn't pure like what hooked them, it was cut ten times over, and cost so much they couldn't feed their habit without robbing and stealing; oh, we had a ball with that. The next time you hear that marijuana leads to hard drugs—well you don't hear that anymore, but it was our Number One chant—remember those soldiers. Pot smells. Heroin don't.

"Oh God, those were the days! The money that went around! I remember a government study 'way back in '72, the figures ..." The old man laughed; it was not until then that Perk realized his own perennial wonderment: did the old Chief ever laugh? Had he ever? There was indeed an unpracticed tone to it, but it was real

and hearty. And brief. "I used to sing myself to sleep with them. A hundred seventy thousand low-level dealers in the US, makin' about \$250 a month each. About a third got busted each year. Got that? Now, the cost for bustin' dealers and potheads in California alone was forty-three million in '69, it went up from there, and a healthy slice of that came to us. You think we were about to lean away from a shower o' gold like that? We had PR blowouts and block meetin's all over, warning against evil, suggestin' it was a commie plot (you wouldn't know what a commie is, or was) and when the facts started flowing the other way we ignored 'em, when they got too deep to ignore 'em we took refuge in: As Long As It Is Illegal We Will Uphold the Law." His voice supplied the complacent capitals. "Cops can always do that. No cop is required to debate the justice of the law, don't you never forget that."

"Was it dangerous, then?"

"Hell no. There is a big study clear back in 1899, the British, where it showed up practically harmless. Even before that a limey doctor name of Birch used pot to cure a chloral hydrate addict and a dude hooked on opium, by steering them to pot and then withdrawing the pot; in the Carolinas, in '59 two doctors were curing addicts and alcoholics with a derivative. I even remember their names, Thompson and Proctor, the doctors, not the addicts."

"And the government didn't—"

"The government just lost the papers, and we, why we upheld the law. Long as there was a law," he added regretfully. "Finally all that was left was a law against growin' it, an' even that faded. Now the government has quality control on ten thousand acres in Mississippi and grows a breed of marijuana so much better than you can grow yourself that it just ain't worth the little trouble it takes." He sighed. "Take away 'forbidden' from the fruit, sell it over the counter like candy bars, make it so a smoker ain't rebelling against anything, an' then you find what it really is and where it's at: a big percentage of folks with a high threshold, got to suck a bomber and a half to get where other folks go with two hits; another big percentage just don't like the taste or smell and can now admit it; and worst of all, it ain't like tobacco and alcohol; it just ain't addictive. Pretty soon a rock group is singin' it plumb out of fashion."

"I know the one," said Perk, and recited (he did not dare sing):

*Heroin will get you dead
LSD will mess your head
Marijuana gives a buzz
Just because you think it does.
Who needs it?*

"That's it," said the old Chief, and sighed again. "With tobacco gone, pot pulls one and a half billion in taxes, and damn little of it comes our way.

"So!" he rapped, and again landslid forward to catch his weight on his elbows and knees. "Here's where you come in.

"First of all you got to change your ways. You got to stop wearin' your education an' good manners like national flags so everybody knows what you are and where you come from. You got to act dumb, talk dumb but *do everything right*. Any time you open your mouth it's an opinion, not a fact. Here's a secret weapon: always act dumber than you are, and everyone will treat you like a dumb-dumb, an' you'll always win. You never read nothin', you never learned nothin' but the P.D. book o' rules. Aside from that you say every stupid thing that comes into your head, as loud as you can. Always remember that there's only two kinds o' people you got to worry about—big shots an' morons. You listen to the big shots an' you talk to the morons—in moron talk. Never mind in-betweens, the smarts. The big shots got the power an' the morons got the vote, and that's a combination the smarts can't beat, there ain't enough of 'em.

"All you need now is what they had in the old days—something you can watch for everywhere, on anybody. Once it was books, would you believe? Or certain kinds of meat. Alcohol. Marijuana. Tobacco. Anything, long as most people are users an' it's illegal. You an' your boys are going to frisk-and-search. Stakeout. Infiltrate. The Marias are comin' out of mothballs, the courts will jam up again. We're goin' to have a force again. Proud. Respected. Feared. There'll be a black market start up. You'll let it get big an' smash it for the news cameras. You're goin' to be Chief. What's that?"

Startled again, Perk followed the pointing finger. On a broad windowsill stood a handsome plant with thick, fleshy, sword-shaped leaves. "Wh—oh. Aloe. Aloe vera."

"Tell me about it."

"Everybody knows. Everybody's got some. Cuts, scrapes,

fleabites, it stops the pain, stops the itch as soon as you squeeze out the jelly and wipe it on. My roomy, she uses it for a hair rinse, face cream. That brown inside layer, it'll cure constipation. It cured my—"

"Well don't stop there."

"Piles," said Perk with difficulty.

"Cured my stomach ulcer, too. Sunburn. Scalds, burns, it leaves no blisters. Grows anyplace, indoors or out, likes to be neglected. Pups out in three, four months, stick the pup in another jug an' you got two. In six months, a dozen. In a year, one hundred. Too bad, but progress always costs."

"You don't mean ... but—there's nothing illegal about it!"

"Yet." The old Chief rocked slowly back and effortfully raised his eyes. "There's a lot of heavy money don't like the aloe vera a bunch. It snuck up on 'em; nobody saw it happen. Cosmetics. Pharmaceuticals. Ethical drugs. Doctors. All we need is a medical opinion, it causes infantile sexuality. All we need is a Bible scholar discovers the snake hid it in the Garden. All we need is a DOA with his stomach full of aloe vera infusion. All we need is a little panic an' aloe'll pile up in the street like snow; mind you, I *know*; folks ain't been scared in a long time now. Then all we need is a Board of Health Condition Red: rotting aloe can cause the plague."

"You'll never get a doctor or a priest to—"

The hating eyes open wide for a terrible moment, and then half closed. "Want to bet?"

Perk slowly rose to his feet, while the Chief crooned, "Now you go on down to HQ and get yourself braced up, because this is goin' to be your show. Do it right, an' next time around, you are goin' to be Chief."

"Yes, sir." Perk went slowly to the door, then turned. "Sir ... *why* me?"

"Because you're a fighter. You got to be ... You always have been. You got the one thing I never had, the one thing that'll make you the greatest Chief this ol' town ever had—your name. A man's got a strike against him with a name like Smith or Jones or Davis or Robinson, my kind of name but your name is Percival Noodlemix. You know what you're goin' to do with that name? You're goin' to put hair on its chest. You're goin' to put a gun in its hand. When you're done they'll be proud to name their

firstborns after you.

“Think a minute, son. Forgettin’ all about the man an’ his work, can you think of a more sissified name than Ernest Hemingway?”

So began the aloe busts, the frisk for half-healed scrapes, the nose-trained dogs, the piles inspections, the choked court calendars, and the police walked proud, respected and feared, and, in time, the babies were named Noodlemix.

Why Dolphins Don't Bite

Dom Felix invented the Receiver. So say the almanacs. So say the encyclopedias, the infobanks, the students.

Dom Felix invented the Receiver.

Dom Felix was not educated in the theory or trained in the technology or temperamentally suited to such an endeavor, but he did indeed accomplish the greatest single upward, outward leap for his species since the taming of fire.

Dom Felix invented the Receiver not because he was inspired but because he was terrified; not because he had achieved wisdom but because he had to confront the truth. Therefore, it had been obsession that brought about the Receiver—obsession and terror.

The accepted version is that Dom Felix brought the Receiver from Earth. This is not true; it was developed on Medea more than three terrayears after he was defrosted there. He brought something, sure enough. He brought news of the Great Acceptance, that strange mixture of philosophy, religion, and logic (though it was really none of these) that had so drastically changed the face of the earth. Had it been a religion, Dom Felix might have been termed a missionary. Had it been a philosophy, he would have come as a teacher. Had its logic been pure, he might never have come at all. Nevertheless, he came, filled with the wonder of the success of his credo, eager to bring it to another world.

Defrosting is a word, and *Receiver* is a word; the Receiver is an ultrachron (some say “transchron”) transceiver. Humanity has always encapsulated its pivotal discoveries in a word, at one time or another. The Pill. The Church. The Bomb. The Trip. Cryogenics had nothing to do with spaceflight, the detection of the bioenergetic aura, and the subsequent development of the phase-inversion field, which became operable before freezing was even tried for the purpose. Yet *defrosting* was still the name of the process by which the field was shut off and the activity of every single one of the passengers' organs (and biochemical reactions

and bacilli and viruses) could resume functioning precisely as they had fifty-one terrayears earlier. He or she would then know that the Trip was over.

“... four, three, two, one,” Dom Felix mumbled obediently, finishing the countdown he had begun half a century earlier, and then he inhaled and coughed at the strident edge of this different air, and “Oh?” at the realization that his naked body, suited in fever heat and yet chilled, was being deftly covered by another and his face was being buried in a mass of honey-colored hair that smelled of sea spray and almonds, and “Oh!” as he felt a sensation that (by his own choice) he had never known before. There was then a long series of undulations against which, in his present condition, he had no defenses, until, with an unspellable syllable that hurt his throat, he experienced an internal explosion that left him two-thirds unconscious and with his eyes screwed shut. He was remotely aware of the other body’s weight leaving his, and “Oh!” (indignantly) as he opened his eyes and saw a nude female deftly plucking a sheath from his most private apostrophe. She caught his eye and smiled. “Welcome to Medea,” she said. Then she left.

Dom Felix shook his head in denial of this reality and, in the process, saw that there was a tall, bearded man dressed in a waxy-looking short tunic standing by his bed. The man had a voice like a tuba. He said, “Welcome indeed, Dom Felix.”

Dom Felix raised his head to look in the direction of the vanished woman. “Who was that?”

“That? That’s Wallich, about the best wide-spectrum technician there is. Nothing but the best for you, you know.”

“Damn it,” said Dom Felix, surly. He ran over the big man’s words in his mind, trying to make sense out of the outlandish accent. “Damn it, I’m celibate.”

“Not now, you’re not,” said the man cheerfully “My name is Altair II. *Two*, written archaically with two *I*’s. To differentiate me from my father, who was Altair Junior, and to differentiate *him* from *his* father, who was just plain Altair. So although there have been three of us, I’m called Two. What’s the matter?”

Dom Felix looked down at himself and made a vague gesture. “I feel self-conscious, lying here like this.” He was a short, broad man with thick, black brows over what seemed to be pupil-less

black eyes, a short, thick beard, short, thick fingers and legs, and a lot of hair on his body.

“Never thought. Sorry,” said Altair, and, crossing his arms downward, he grabbed the hem of his tunic and whipped it off over his head, whereupon the woman Wallich entered. She was dressed a bit.

“Oh, God,” said Dom Felix. He sat up to protect himself. It made his head swim, and he could feel the blood draining from his face. “Easy,” said Wallich; she was by his side in one swift stride, holding him competently by one shoulder and the small of his back.

“I think the clothes thing has turned around again,” said Altair.

“Oh, sorry,” said Wallich, releasing Dom Felix’s shoulder, her hand darting to the clasp on her shoulder. Dom Felix managed to catch her wrist. “Please, no. Just get me my clothes.”

“Right here,” said Altair. He lifted a storage case marked **FELIX** and placed it on a small table and tapped a silver patch on the side. The top sprang open, and he lifted out a heavy mass of black fabric. “The group that came here not three years ago—everybody covered from ankles to nose—screamed when they saw what we wear here. Of course, that was a slow ship. It took almost eighty terrayears to get here. The one before that, we couldn’t keep clothes on ’em. They felt it was dishonest. Even out at the Rim, they’d rather freeze than be dishonest.”

“Please,” said Dom Felix, holding out one hand for the garment. He swung his feet over the side of the bed and again felt the rush of faintness. Wallich put her arms firmly around him. When he could, he disengaged them. “I’m all right. *Please.*”

“That clothes thing,” said Altair, absently turning the heavy garment over and around, evidently trying to find the most convenient way to hand the thing to Dom Felix. “The pendulum swings, all through history, but it doesn’t swing straight, and the frequency varies. Certain times and places, it was immoral to display feet. Other places, knees. Faces. Genitals. Bellybuttons. Buttocks. And combinations thereof. I have a theory; the human race is innately disinterested in sex. The more so, the nakeder it gets. So when people find the libido starting to atrophy, they begin decorating the sexual emblems and pretty soon cover them up, which is a very good way to put sex under forced draft. If it weren’t for that, the species would’ve died out long ago. What we

are, what we've always been, is cripples. We got our rut cycles amputated; so we have the clothes thing instead."

Dom Felix blew air out through his nostrils and started to get up. Wallich said, "Altair, stop chattering and give it to him; he's not ready to walk yet."

"Oh, sorry." Altair handed the garment over, and Dom Felix found a hem and pulled the thing on over his head. He stood up and, with Wallich's deft assistance, got his arms through the sleeves and let the garment fall around him. It was a heavy black burnoose that came halfway down his shins. He sat back, trembling, and made himself raise the hood and draw it over his head. With the beard beneath and the shadows above, his face retreated into a dark cave, from which, astonishingly, his black-on-black eyes glowed brightly.

"That's better."

"Put yours on too, Altair."

"Huh? Oh. Oh, yes." Altair scooped up his tunic and donned it. He gestured at the burnoose. "That thing'll be great for Circle Three on out, but it'll smother you in here."

"Surely that's not all you wear on Medea."

"What you wear on Medea depends on where you are on Medea. Medea has everything, all the time—cold, hot, wind, wet, dry, desert, mud, and supermud. Here, where we are, is Pellucidar. Center of the earth. Ancient term derived from the days when Terrans lived in burrows and ate rice. This section is central to Earth Main, which is the middle building of this colony, which is called Argoview, the dumbest name of any of the Terran enclaves, because the only places there can be an enclave on this crazy blob are places where you can view Argo. So air, light, and humidity in Pellucidar are as near Earth average as we can get. It's positive pressure, like a 'clean room.' Any airflow is outward from here, so the pressure stays the same. Then there are five concentric segments, where the air is increasingly mixed with Medean air; you move out at your own pace until you get used to it. When you get used to it and come back in here, you find the lights too bright and the air too thin and the oxy-mix making you a little ding-y."

"It shows," said Wallich, not unkindly. To Dom Felix she said, "You stay here and talk to Altair, and relax. Please, relax. Your body has been through a lot, and your head doesn't know it yet,

not really. I've got to see how your fellow passenger is getting along." She waved and left.

"Oh, God. Kert Row," said Dom Felix. Altair raised an eyebrow. "Is that Acceptance?" he asked good-naturedly.

"Has nothing to do with Acceptance," Dom Felix said testily. "Kert Row is an agricultural expert sent out here with new hardware dreamed up according to new theories by Occam, and for two and a half weeks during prep he did nothing but talk to me about the theories and the hardware. It happens that I have no understanding and no talent in either area. I wish I had. If I showed irritation then, it was at myself."

Altair came over and sat down next to him. "You know I like you," he said candidly. "Most people, 'specially Trippers trying to make a heavy impression, go all out to hide what they're not good at. You come right out with it."

"Well, thanks. Thank you." Somewhere in that portable dark, the shadowed face showed that it was moved.

"And you're not stupid. Fifty-one percent of smart is knowing what you're dumb at. An old financier named Brentwood said that."

Dom Felix was now close to being embarrassed. "Go on with what you were saying before."

"Oh, yes. Pellucidar. Clothes. We wear what we please, or nothing, if we feel like it. Why should we? Controlled environment, and, anyway, like it or not, the skin is the largest organ of the body. It needs light, and it needs to breathe, and it was never meant to be covered up all the time. We grab as much light and this air as we can, when we can. There's damn little light and far too much of the other air out there."

"That's too bad," said Dom Felix.

"What's too bad?"

"Sorry. Thinking aloud. About what I have to do here. Pass it, please."

"No, tell me about what you're going to do. Acceptance, and all that."

"Well, how much do you know?"

"Not too much. What I've learned, I like. From what I hear, it's changed the face of the earth. Nations don't fight with nations, even brothers don't fight with sisters. A man about to cheat you in a game, or a deal, suddenly tells you so and plays it straight. A

contractor never estimates the highest price he can get—just his cost plus a fair profit. A man running for election starts out by saying everything bad he ever did and tells the voters what bad habits he has that he hasn't been able to break, before he says anything about how good he is. That right?"

"That's almost right. I mean, it's not a hundred percent yet. But it's getting there. It is better than it's ever been, back there on Earth. There've been some bad times there, you know."

"Sure I know. I didn't tell you. I'm a historian. *An* historian, if you're a purist in the Old Tongue. What that means is that I read a lot, think a lot, see what of that which I read and think applies to where we are and where we're going, and pontificate about it. Out here we study Old Earth probably a lot more than the homebodies. It keeps us together."

"And yet you've sent for me."

"Oh, that. Well, yes, God knows we need you. We're just about split in two—if we're not already. Two and a third, maybe. It's the Gengies, you see."

"Gengies?"

"Genetically Engineered. They like to call themselves Truforms. They're all Medeaborn—if you can call making them born. They're, well, produced. If we need a supergenius math type or a guy *this* wide and only *this* high to work in the mines, we make one, that's all. Not that we ever go too far away from the norm. They may have a specialty, but they have to live with us."

"Us. Them."

"Well, damn it, there *is* a difference. We're Naturals—Nats, we call ourselves. We let God choose the genes, yes, and love. That's the way it's always been; that's what made us two-legged critters what we are. Now they come along and act as if they're *better* than us!"

"Are they?"

"Whenever we design them to be, sure. Their specialties—they're tops. Why not? But do you think they're grateful? No way! Look, they try to reason it both ways. They're superior because they're good at what they were designed for. And they're deprived because we have history, an ancient homeland, racial memory, and they haven't. They're better than us, and they're deprived. They can't have it both ways, but they want it both ways. And there's going to be trouble. Big trouble, and Medea isn't

big enough for trouble like that. Well, Medea is, but the Terran enclaves are not. There's talk of the Gengies driving us out."

"Out where?"

"Out there. It's real hell out there, Dom Felix."

"Who talks of the Gengies driving you out?"

"Well, everybody."

"Who, everybody? Are the Gengies telling you that?"

"They aren't telling us anything!"

"Ah. So it's you Nats who are telling one another that."

"Well, it figures."

"Does it?" Dom Felix paused. "Tell me something. Do they like to be called Gengies?"

"Oh, man, you'd better not. Not to their face."

"Mm. And what do they call you among themselves?"

Dom Felix thought the man colored. When the answer seemed too long in coming, Dom Felix turned wordlessly toward him and waited again. At last Altair said in a low voice, "Vaj."

"What?"

"Singular, Vaj. Plural, Vags. It means 'vagina,' vagina-born. And a lot is in how they say it, too. There've been some pretty bad fights."

"I can imagine. What's this third group you mentioned?"

"Oh, them. They're Mules."

"Mules?"

"Once in a long while a Nat gets a Gengie pregnant. Though not me. They make me nervous. And the other way 'round, too. And usually if a baby gets born, it grows up sterile. Well, you've heard of that before, if you know any biology. Take a lion and a tiger. Big cats, same diet, pretty much the same habits. They won't breed. If you try it under laboratory conditions, you might make it once in twenty tries. And if you don't get a stillbirth, you'll get a mule."

"Yes, I know that. It's the very definition of species. One of the basic tenets of Acceptance is the simple scientific fact that there is no form of humanity on Earth that cannot breed readily with any other. Never mind should. Never mind might. They *can*. Once you grasp that, you begin to understand man as what he is—a single species."

"And what we have here," said Altair, "is a different species, and that's all we're saying."

"You still get Mules, though, and that means you're still very, very close. Tell me. What do the Mules think?"

"That's what we don't really know. Dom Felix, do you know what a 'swing vote' was in an old-time election?"

"That's when a small party has enough votes, in a close election, to decide which of the big ones will win, although they themselves have to lose."

"I like you better all the time," Altair said warmly. "Well, that's the situation with the Mules. We can't tell where they'll throw their weight. I'll tell you this about them, though. In brains and in work, they vary from excellent all the way down to good."

"That's the nicest thing you've said about me all day," said Wallich from the doorway, in a dangerously sweet voice. "Dom Felix, I'm one of those Mules. Hee haw, and all that."

"Oh, Lord, Wally, I, I didn't, I mean I ..." Altair turned almost frantically to Dom Felix. "Listen, there stands the best synthesizing technician in all Medea. There is nobody like her, nobody. Chemistry, biochemistry, physiotherapy, psychotherapy, she can run any piece of equipment in the place. Yes, she can *fix* any piece of equipment. That's what I was just telling him, Wally!"

"I'm so pleased," she said steadily, and there were tears in her eyes. "Now tell him that I have ears as good as yours, feelings as tender as yours, and that I can hurt. Just as much as a *real* person." And she turned quietly and left.

Altair sprang to his feet. "Man, I did indeed blast it good. I'd better go and—"

With a cold sternness Altair had not yet seen, Dom Felix pointed to the bed beside him. "You'd better sit right down again." A moment of confusion, then Altair came and sat. More gently, Dom Felix said, "It won't do a bit of good to chase after her now if I'm any judge, and I am. Later will do, and I'll help if I can, and I can."

"Now you've been almost embarrassing in expressing your liking for me. I'm going to embarrass you twice. One: I like you. I like you very much. I think you're super-bright, and I think your instincts are in the right place, and I think you're basically honest. Two: I think your long view of human affairs has preoccupied you so much that you've lost your link to the short view: here, now Medea. You told me that your function here was

to apply that link, and I am telling you that you are not doing it and that therefore you are not doing your Job.”

“Now wait a—”

“It’s testing time, Mister Historian, and I’m glad that’s your specialty and that I can speak to it and that I can make my point simply and quickly without sidling up to it. Do you know what a Catharist was?”

“Well, I—”

“A Huguenot, a Jansenist?”

Altair nodded. “The Huguenots were—”

Implacably, Dom Felix drove on: “Waldenses, Adamites, Irgun Zwei Leumi, Mormons, Mau Maus, Pieds Noirs, the Confederacy, Symbionese, Froets Raiders, Sans-Culottes, the Polar Gang, the IRA, the Anzac Hangmen, the PLO?”

“Most of those. A lot of them, anyway. The Polar—”

Overriding, Dom Felix demanded, “What were the issues of the Thirty Years War? Why the story that men and women were hanged for wearing the color green? Did you know that men were flogged and churches were burned because they did or did not have candles on the altar? Why would a man be hunted down and speared like a boar because he had been seen raising his wine glass over a glass of water? What were the issues? What were the issues?”

“Well, in the case of—”

“Ah! You know. You know because you are Mister Historian. But suppose you are not Mister Historian. You are a modern Terran with a good education and a fine background, and I say to you, Catharists. I say, Waldenses. I say, what are the issues?”

“I ... I guess I’d have to say, I don’t know. I’d have to say, I’ll look it up.”

“But if I say, modern Terran, does it matter what the issues are? Does it really matter to you?”

“Well, I guess not. Not now.”

“Aha. Now we have it. *Not now*. Altair Two, I submit to you, looking down the long sweep of history, that it did not matter then, those things for which people fought and died and were imprisoned and tortured and burned; that in the deepest sense it did not matter if a man turned his face toward Mecca or Rome or Canterbury or stood alone on a rock on a mountain and poured prayer on the rising sun or paid his tithes to this or that emperor.

Yes, of course, it was made to matter to the man, but in the larger sense the issues were issues that had no real significance. I read a story about a man who traced back through three centuries of warfare to find the basic issue, and it turned out to be a quarrel over the king's breakfast, whether one should break a boiled egg on the big end or the little end."

"That was, ah, Dean Swift. *Tolliver's Travels*."

"Thank you. I'd forgotten. And I submit to you now that your splits here on Medea, with your Nats and Mules and Vags and Truforms, are of the same category and do ... not ... *matter!*"

They sat glaring at each other for a moment, Dom Felix less and less as the moments passed, Altair II more and more until he exploded.

"By God it does *matter!* Do you think we can run the risk of the Geng—ah, Truforms—breeding at random, one with superior size and another with a superior logic, a double-dominant, and a brat who would grow up to be something we couldn't handle? Do you think we want to repeat the mistake of the Computer Wars, when men had to obey the commands of their own creations? Damn it, Dom Felix, the only reason the issues you just reeled off—Oh hell, man, you do know your history!—don't matter is that those issues were settled—fought and won and done with, and that's why they don't matter. This one is here and now, and we will fight, we will bleed, I will bleed! It's got to be stopped! Then in another thousand years you can look back and say that only a specialist can even remember what the issues were. But you can't say it now."

"I can say it now, and I do. The issues are what they have always been when men turn on one another. You have the power, and I want it. I have the power, and you must obey. I will kill you if you do not give me the power. I will kill you if you threaten to take my power away. It is that *that* does not matter; it is that *that* is triviality."

"Well, if you think we're going to knuckle under to a bunch of ... of ... why, they're not even *human!*"

"Altair, *my* history books say that from time to time the Visigoths were not human, the Japanese, the Jews, the Germans, the Irish, the New Jibaros, the—"

"Propaganda talk, Dom Felix," Altair interrupted tiredly. "But this one time they really *are not human!*"

“And I too really am not human.”

The voice behind them was metallic and not quite a monotone, and synchronized with it was a series of soft grunts, whistles, and squeaks, all but inaudible. Dom Felix whirled around and gasped. Altair whirled around—and laughed.

Squatting against the back wall was the strangest animal? creature? being? monster? that Dom Felix had ever seen. It rose as they turned; it was taller than Dom Felix, though not as tall as Altair. It was covered in gray-blue fur, with large upthrust triangular ears, clawed feet with slender ankles, and extremely massive thighs, shaped rather like those of a wolf, but obviously jointed to what must be something very like a human pelvis, for it could stand upright with its legs almost straight. The arms were long and slender and seemed to be muscled with knotted steel cable. What at first seemed to be a decoration or even a kind of garment proved to be an inordinately long tail, wound diagonally around the torso upward from its base, just over the small potbelly, and on around and around until its pointed bony tip rested in the area of what would be, in a human, the clavicle. Hooked around the neck was a padded metal band bearing a small grille and a slender curved wire, terminating in a knot the size of a thumbnail, which hovered a few centimeters from the mouth—or was *snout* a better term? A purplish tongue flicked out and in, and Dom Felix was able to see a flash of blue-white teeth, clearly those of an omnivore, with blunted canines and very even, manifestly sharp incisors. The most fascinating feature to Dom Felix was the hands, which bore two two-jointed opposable digits and two very long fingers with small curved claws and, in the palms, a protruding chitinous pair of nippers, or beaks, shaped rather like a parrot’s but more slender. As the two men rose and turned, it was striking and scraping the two sets of nippers together, making a dry, high-pitched chirping sound.

“Laughing,” said Altair aside to Dom Felix, briefly imitating with his own hands the movement of the creature’s. “That’s the way he laughs.” Aloud, he cried: “Aquare, you ol’ long-tailed hop-toad—I’m glad you blew in! This is Dom Felix here at last—he just tripped down. Dom Felix, this is my oldest friend on Medea. Really. He used to bounce me in his arms while my mom was working in the labs.”

The long, thin lips quivered and moved; the strange sequence

of whistles and clicks emerged softly while the little metal grille said, "Please be welcome and the happiest, Dom Felix. We have spoken much of you and how you have saved the Terra."

"I have heard a great deal about you, too. You are quite a celebrity on Terra, you know And please, I have not saved the Earth, not at all. I think the Movement I work in has done a great deal of good; it was doing it before I joined, and all I am doing is to try to return the good it has done me."

"Ah, please lengthen yourself."

Dom Felix turned a puzzled face to Altair, who laughed and said, "He means, essentially, don't be modest. Ask him how old he is."

"What?"

"Go ahead."

"Aquare, would you mind telling me how old you are?"

"I have achieved my maturity."

Altair said, "You know, according to the records, that is precisely the answer he gave more than eighty terrayears ago. Ask him why he is the only Arcan—that's his city, Arca—the only one who has ever learned our language."

"Why is that, Aquare?"

"There is no need."

Altair said, "That's from eighty terrayears ago, too. Years before that he showed up at the enclave, when it was nothing but a dome and a few fields. He just hung around all the time, didn't want food, didn't want anything. Security got very uptight at first, but, thank the powers, we had a Big Chief with the wit not to blast him. Just a tight guard and observers. One day one of 'em, a bright Gen—ah, Truform—called Zylo, noticed those noises he was making and claimed to recognize words. A whole team got to work on it and designed the first version of that computer-translator he's wearing. It's been improved a lot since then. And he's been a great help. He's arranged a dozen or more tours to Arca over the years, though not much anymore. Nothing changes over there. You'll see for yourself when you start to move around."

While he spoke, the Medean stood quite motionless, head turned to one side. Dom Felix realized suddenly that he did not have binocular vision. Like a rabbit or a squirrel or most Terran birds, the averted head meant Aquare was looking straight at

him. Altair was saying, "Neither Aquare nor any other Arcan ever asked for or took a thing from us. Even when our engineers thought they had a better way to do something, or some device or gadget to give to them that they might use, they just looked at it and walked off, and old Aquare here just wouldn't say why. 'We are content,' " he mimicked, and the Medean went *chirp-chirp-chirp*. "And what the hell! We're just not in competition. There's plenty of room, we never built near Arca or any fishing or hunting ground we thought they might use; we can't eat the same food; there's just no reason for any friction. So as time went on, Aquare became free to come and go any time. He stays out of the way—he has a real instinct for that—and he never goes into restricted areas or anywhere where he might hurt himself. He'll talk to you for as long as you like, anytime, and never gets miffed if you have to cut it short. He'll answer any question—almost—and I just can't remember his ever asking one."

"Doesn't he mind our talking about him behind his back to his face like this?"

"Say no; say no," said the strange mixed voice. "I am a very pleasant conversation."

"Another Terran tripped down with Dom Felix, Aquare. Would you like to meet him?"

"He is Kert Row. I have meet him. He and machines and theories all happy harmony together I do not think they harmony with Medea. I do not say him that. I wish he happy until rested. Time then find out."

Altair groaned. "Here we go again. It's that damn Occam. Such a great idea in theory, a projective computer that will give you the simplest possible solution using all the data, because, according to 'Occam's Razor,' the simplest solutions have the greatest possibility of being right. But how do you tell Occam that problems on Medea are not simple, that solutions that work are never simple, and that there's no way to feed the computer all the data?"

"It's been pretty good at cutting transmission time from Earth to Medea, though, receiving laser as long as the trip is in range, computing probable outcomes, and beaming those ahead," Dom Felix said. "That's what brought me here at this time instead of maybe forty years later."

"That is a truly horrible thought," said Altair. To the Medean

he said, "Dom Felix is going to solve all our problems for us."

"Going to try," said Dom Felix, suspecting that the cheerful historian might have a touch of vicious irony in him.

"I hear him solving," said Aquare. "Waldenses, Adamites, Irgun Zwei Leumi." A pause. "Altair II, you put your ear far down in mouth of Dom Felix. Leave there." Pause again. "Could be Dom Felix is very great. Or very very great. Or the greatest Terran yet on Terra. On Medea. Soon I will know."

Blushing like a schoolgirl, Dom Felix said, "I really don't think I'm so great, Aquare."

"True. But could be. Soon I know."

"I really don't know what to say," murmured Dom Felix sincerely.

"Say you sleep now. You more tired than you know. Dream happy."

"Omigod, yes!" cried Altair. "I shouldn't have kept you up, got you all stirred up." He leaped up, swung Dom Felix around, and lowered him gently. Sleep approached with a rush, holding back just long enough for him to hear Aquare intone sagely, "There is no should. There is only is."

Kert Row, tow-headed engineering genius, lay with his eyes open and started up when Altair came in. "Hi. Hey," he said, abruptly propping himself up on his elbow, "you know who that is in there?"

"Sure do. Dom Felix. And he just corked off, which is what you ought to be doing."

"I don't mean just his name. Do you know who he is?"

"Fill me in. It's hard to know when Occam leaves off on facts and fades in the projections. The projections are pretty impressive, though."

"I haven't seen them," said the engineer, "but, sight unseen, I am here to tell you they don't do that man justice. You just don't know what happens when that man turns on ... whatever you call it that he turns on." He laughed. "Words just don't do it, see? Look, I saw him put a hundred thousand people in a stadium into some sort of a, oh hell, I was going to say trance. It wasn't a trance. You wake up from trances."

"He certainly spun my head around." Altair pursed his lips.

"I know what you mean," said Kert Row. (Altair doubted that.)

“But you have to see him in action, with a crowd, I mean, before you can appreciate what happens when you’re alone with him. After that stadium thing, when I found out I was going to prep with him for two and a half weeks, I thought he was going to burn me to a crisp in the first twelve minutes. But you know what? The whole time he let me talk. He wanted me to talk, and he really *listened*. I was the guru, he was the student.”

“Well, he was,” Altair said. “He told me that. He said he was angry at himself for having so little knowledge, so little talent in your field, and how he wished he had even some of what you had.”

“He *did*? Oh ... my ...” The “my” came out despairingly, as if he had searched for expletives and found none that would suit and had to fall back on something so pale. Altair hoped he would not actually ask whether he had had the same experience with the man in the black burnoose, and his hope was realized. Kert Row fell very suddenly asleep with a luminous smile on his face. Altair did not know how long he stood there, tanning his heart with the smile.

“Oh.”

He turned around. Wallich. One long stride, and he had her, upturned hands on her elbows. He said, “No more ‘Mule,’ public or private. Ever.”

Tears. There had been tears before, too, but what a difference! He had a mad thought that they must taste different, angry tears and ... and these. He slid his arms around her, and she leaned against him for a time. He raised his head, then turned it toward the door, a quiet suggestion. She stood back and looked into his face, eyes wide open and certain, and shook her head. “Not now, Altair. And not for a very long time, but thank you.” She tiptoed to kiss him swiftly on the corner of the mouth and went out.

He glanced at the other door, the adjoining room where Dom Felix slept. *Little hairy man*, he thought, *you do move and shake things around here*.

In the weeks that followed (Terran weeks, of course; Medea stubbornly and reverently adhered to Old World time), Dom Felix visited, Dom Felix observed, Dom Felix questioned and listened and studied; he became as ubiquitous as the Arcan Aquare, appearing everywhere, anywhere, at any time at all, while

staying out of the way.

He witnessed the departure of the lander that had brought him and experienced the strange mixture of feelings experienced by all Trippers; it was unlike any other departure since men first traveled, boarded, entrained, and emplaned, for there was no waving from the rail, no message from over a horizon, no captain's table, flight attendant—none of that. There were seventeen days of psychological and biological preparation, and then immersion in the bioenergetic phase—inversion field—all this planetside. Subjectively, the Trip was instantaneous; objectively, a half-century or so. Between these extremes of time, Occam, the projective computer, drank information until the well ran dry, soaked up by distance. It did its extrapolations, and, when it could, it sought and found its opposite number on the approaching ship (for ships, few as they were, were scheduled to coincide going and coming, so they might pass each other somewhere near Midpoint Turnover). As long as they could, they swapped and shared and then turned their lasered cargoes on their destinations, so that when they arrived, all their news and knowledge were there before them. It was difficult to regard the Trippers as strangers; only the destination was strange, and that only to the Tripper himself. Knowing all this, it was a quite indescribable emotional experience to watch the departure of a shuttle bound for its orbiting interplanetary—a launch that, if one tripped again, one would not feel, a Trip that, from beginning to end, one would not truly experience, in a ship one would never see. For all that, the launch represented the casting off, the burning of the bridge, the lost opportunity to take it all back, cancel the plans, go back home. And then the impact that no amount of prep could ever quite erase: *You can't go home again.* That poignant truth so often learned by any growing consciousness was multiplied immeasurably: Home wasn't there anymore. A true-time century would take care of that.

His acclimatization took considerably less time than anyone had expected, and soon he was able to stay quite comfortably at the Rim, breathing ninety percent Medean air and becoming accustomed to Medea's strange and multishadowed light—what some forgotten technician with a poetic twist had called thick light. He found, as had others before him, that his eyes, more and more, winced from the brilliant light flooding the Terran

agricompounds, finding comfort in the more muted tones of the land and the faintly luminous dull oranges of the estuary. The winged structures of the outbuildings fascinated him, for Earth had never seen the like; ultimately he would claim one of them as his own.

His preoccupation, of course, was with people, the interaction of people with people and between people and ideas. He won the confidence of the Big Chief, Director Kesseridge, a born administrator who was so good at his job that it was rumored he might be a Truform, made to order; so good at his job that he was bored with it, bored as only a man can be who has no alternative to that which he does well. Dom Felix was able to interest him in that facet of Acceptance that taught the ability to listen to a man being wrong without correcting him. It was hard to do, even to grasp, at first, but when he set out to practice it, he found himself welcomed more and more in places and in situations he had never dared approach before. He thought this was a miracle and Dom Felix was a magician, and thenceforward all doors were open to the hairy little man in the black burnoose.

Dom Felix acquainted himself with all the sections—astronomy, agriculture, meteorology, biochemistry, radiology, xenology, bioenergetics, ecology, and all the divisions of life support. Most often he was the student and the specialists were the teachers; occasionally he displayed absolutely astonishing knowledge in one field or another. He had no intuitive grasp of mechanics or number, in its widest sense, but he was as fascinated as a wondering child at what they could do. He seemed (because it was genuinely so) ashamed of what he considered vast holes in his erudition, and his expression of it can only be called bold embarrassment—an immediate willingness to announce the fact that he did not know and that he could not grasp. It was most disarming, and it made no enemies. And he began to distribute his sign.

Interest in it developed slowly. He did not force it or sell it or seem to attach much significance to it. He simply did it. Regarded at first as a mere quirk, it began to attract attention and then curiosity; when in a conversation would he make this sign, and did these occasions have anything in common? What was its purpose, and what did it mean? Speaking with someone, he would put out his hands, palms down, the left resting on the

right, and raise them together almost to the level of his face, while slightly inclining his head. Then the hands would fall away and the talk would continue. Thought at first to be a gesture of greeting or of farewell—a kind of *sayonara*—it was gradually noticed to occur at neither of these events.

It was, in its quiet way, extraordinarily potent. The hands placed together and raised appeared to be defensive, to say “Stop!” But the inclined head turned it into a tribute, a concession: “You have a point there.” One thing was certain. Whatever provoked the gesture—intensity, passion, rudeness, that kind of positiveness once described as “being wrong at the top of your voice,” or even simple inaccuracy—once the gesture was made, it ended with Dom Felix having the floor. It was one of the most ingenious stoppers ever devised, and the more its meaning was understood, the more potent it became.

The day Acceptance entered Medea was the day someone was moved to ask of the sign, “What does it mean when you do that?”

Dom Felix smiled and answered. “It’s a way of becoming.” No more would he say about it for a long time.

The day Acceptance began to ferment in the enclave was the day someone thought to ask, “A way of becoming what?”

And Dom Felix smiled and answered, “It’s a way of becoming you.”

He would discuss this, when asked, though he never forced it. He explained that when he used the sign, he suspended his own thought and even his own identity and made a profound effort to *become* the other person, to see with his eyes, feel with his fingertips, think with all his method and mode, background and learning. So the gesture did indeed cry, “Stop!”—not to the observer, conversant, opponent, but to Dom Felix himself. And the quality of obeisance was real, because for that moment the other was dominant. And the air of concession was real, for during that moment the other was as right, as authoritarian, as commanding, as he felt himself to be.

The day Acceptance achieved full flow on Medea was the day one man used the sign on another, and neither was Dom Felix.

And the day Acceptance could acknowledge its victory was the day a Natural used the sign in talking to a Truform. Mission accomplished.

The mission was, of course, not accomplished in any single hour, for the concept had to soak in cell by cell, as bread takes up red wine. And like any battle won, it had then to be secured, and to this Dom Felix now turned his attention. During the time in which the raised hands were replacing the raised fist, Dom Felix worked toward the root cause of the rift between the Naturals and the Truforms. "It has to be simple," he told Altair. "All basic things are simple. Complicated things might be vital, they might make great literature and music and empires and human disasters. But if they are complicated, they are by definition not basic." Altair spent a good deal of time with him, especially since Dom Felix had gently pointed out to him something he should have known, something that had sidled up on historians since the first troglodyte grunted the tale of last month's contest with the timber wolf: History isn't only *then*; it's now. Dom Felix, in his turn, was delighted with the big man's growled and pithy comments. "Ye shall know the truth," he said one day, "and the truth shall make you frantic. Mankind has never solved its problems. It has just substituted larger ones."

And Wallich. Wallich was invaluable to Dom Felix because of her wide knowledge of so many technologies and their theoretical underpinnings. Her ability to make clear analogies between anything she knew well and anything else she observed was a knack so absent from Dom Felix that he carried a kind of vacuum in its place. Like all movers and shakers before him, he was an obsessive and lacked the synthesist's ability to seek for the balance in things, to turn the coin over, to seek for parity when imbalance fell in his wished-for directions. Wallich had changed radically since his arrival, polite and efficient as always but intimate with no one. She made herself useful, close to essential, to Dom Felix while carrying on all her other responsibilities. And if this cost her recreation and sleep, she bore it well. No one knew.

The third favorite of Dom Felix was the young agricultural engineer who had Tripped out with him, Kert Row. True to Altair II's prediction, the hardware he had brought with him—automatic machinery to invert and neutralize the hormone poisons that made Terran crops and bacteria lethal to those of Medea—was useless. The theories the hardware was based on were nonsense. Faced with the facts, he made no effort to deny

them. Despite his years of labor in the R&D of something the computers assured him would work, but that did not, he flung his energy and design genius into new problems, half a dozen of them, ranging from jet-cycle improvements (they say the level-deck stabilizer was his) and a new high-acceleration centrifuge to mess-hall conveyors and a balanced-light easel for the art section in recreation. His grasp of physical principles was so clear and immediate that it was he, for example, rather than Aquare or any of the old hands, who was able to explain to Dom Felix the basic idea of an Arcan wing structure just by looking at one. All Terran buildings were designed this way now, dome buildings having been all but abandoned. Medea's ferocious, unpredictable winds were capable of sweeping away almost any kind of surface structure, just as a hurricane-proof building will blow apart in a tornado. "By golly, they got wings!" exclaimed Kert Row the very first time he and Dom Felix looked out from the Rim of Pellucidar across the Terran compound. "Those buildings. You see? Wings. Airfoils!"

Dom Felix looked at the odd structures, puzzled. They were rooted to the ground, and they bristled with short, thick shelves, as if a builder, assigned to apply eaves, had suffered an acute attack of surrealism and had stuck short pieces allover the roof and walls. At Kert Row's command he watched them carefully, through the twirl and bluster of the Medean gusts. The "wings" were trembling, becoming thick, then thin, twisting, warping. "How about that!" the engineer said admiringly "How about damn well that!"

"I don't understand."

"Those buildings don't fight the wind. They use it! Watch that. There, do you see? You see what's happening? Those foils can sense wind direction and force, make one edge a leading edge and the other a trailing edge, and bulge the chord enough to give positive or negative lift, or ... yes, see that? They can twist from the root, acting like the control planes on an underwater craft. But, working together, they ride the wind or use it to press down or relieve strain no matter where the wind blows from or how strong the gust is. But, my God, they have to sense and react in microseconds! How do they do that in time?"

"Are you really asking me?" Dom Felix was awed and genuinely humble.

"I go find out," said Kert Row, and he pelted off. When excited, he would speak in some idiom of his own, a sort of baby talk. Dom Felix looked after him admiringly and turned back to contemplate the bristle of nervous wings.

Kert Row indeed found out and returned with an explanation, not one word in ten of which Dom Felix understood. It was a welter of chips and microsensors, pressure magazines, release valves, dynaflex and alloy cores, microcryogenic superconducting hairs, and lots more. *By definition not basic*, thought Dom Felix, *but it works*. He was overwhelmed with admiration for Kert Row's ability in this, to him, impenetrable area. He let himself float uncomprehendingly in this sea of words until he heard Kert Row say, "And you know what? It's an Arcan design."

"It's a what? I understood the Arcans had no technology to speak of."

"Right. They haven't. They grow the wings for their buildings. They have a central building in Arca with a tower thirty meters tall—in this wind!"

"Grow them?" Dom Felix asked.

"This is a crazy place," said the engineer, and it was a compliment to the place. "This is a crazy toy shop. All the weather there ever was, one place or another; little ecological pockets, all kinds of mutati-potent radiation. But look, even on Terra we have little plants that fold their leaves when you touch them. Why not a plant that adjusts its leaves to support the plant in variable hurricanes? Survival is survival."

Well, that's basic, said Dom Felix to himself, and he reflected that basics may be simple, but when you get all the way down, you don't get a thing or even a method. You get a principle. "Then why do we need all that hardware?"

"Because we're poison to Medean life forms, just the way they are to us. We can't work with living plants or living anything, not with any reliability. We *can* work with their principles."

"That's what I just said," and only then did Dom Felix realize he hadn't said it aloud. He went away to meditate on the nature of basics and the nature of principles. And it was through this path that he secured the victory of Acceptance on Medea.

"I want to find the truth, the real truth, about something," he told Wallich one day. "And I think you're the one to ask. You are not a

Nat, and you are not a Truform.” He saw her tense, but only because, by now, he knew exactly what to look for, and he was looking for it. My, she was cool.

She looked at him levelly. “And exactly what am I, in your eyes?”

“A real person.”

It was quite the right thing to say. “What do you want to know?”

“Something that perhaps I shouldn’t be asking. If I really shouldn’t, will you keep my asking confidential and tell me anyway?”

She looked at him for a long moment, level eyes under a frame of heavy honey hair. She seemed to find in him a man who could keep a confidence, and perhaps by then she had one herself that might need to be kept. She nodded.

“Thank you.” It was no idle, push-button Thank You. “Nats are fertile, Truforms seldom are. Why?”

“Because of the way a Truform is designed and decanted. Realigning his DNA gives him or her whatever special talent is needed but takes away the ability to reproduce. But why should that make a difference? He or she can make love or have sex fun just like anybody else, and if it’s children they want, they can get them by contract easily enough.”

“They get a special talent or structure, and it costs them fertility. The one means the other.”

“Everybody knows that.”

Dom Felix smiled. “You’d be surprised at the things ‘everybody knows’ from time to time. Once everybody knew that old Terra was flat, and if you went too far, you could fall off the edge, and it rested on the back of a big turtle, and the sun went around it.”

She laughed. “No.”

“Oh, yes. Now everybody believes that the engineers can’t design in a new characteristic without eliminating fertility.”

“Well, they can’t. Or they don’t. They never have. Dom Felix, what are you driving at?”

“I’ve just been fantasizing that maybe the earth is round like a ball.” He had at times a sudden and childlike smile, and he used it now “I’ve been thinking that maybe the engineers *can* inject a special characteristic without eliminating fertility—always could. They just don’t.”

“Well, they can’t,” she said positively. “And if they ever could, why haven’t they? If they had, there wouldn’t be this trouble between them and the Va—er, Nats.”

He spread his hands. “If I knew for sure, I could stop fantasizing about it. Wallich, will you check it out for me?”

“Well, sure, if you really want me to, although it’s like finding out if we really breathe oxygen.”

“Then find out if we really breathe oxygen,” he said. “But, Wally, find out *carefully*, all right? I’d as soon nobody knew I was wondering about it. And be careful. It just might be a hot question—hotter than you realize.”

“I don’t believe it, but—all right, I’ll be careful.” She rose in a swirl of gossamer and went out.

Dom Felix leaned back in the lounge, which gently massaged his lower back, and he began to meditate. He was interrupted after a time by a soft, rapid chirping. “Aquare!” He opened his eyes. He was right. The bizarre creature squatted against the wall by the door, brushing his long, strange hands together in his mode of laughter.

“You’re laughing at me.” Dom Felix said this without rancor. He had by this time become quite accustomed to the Medean’s appearances, which seemed to be occurring more and more often. He had been told at his defrosting that the Arcans, like virtually everything else on Medea, had no conflict with humanity, no competition for anything with the possible exception of Lebensraum, and there was still plenty of room on plenty of land and probably always would be. Medea’s function in the universe—as Terrans conceived the universe—was to supply one single export: knowledge. There seemed no reason for Arcans, or even one Arcan, not to have the same motivation: to acquire knowledge without conflict, without competition, without friction. And if from time to time Terran and Arcan found each other funny, it was to be expected. Accepted.

“Laughing is I am intelligenter; you a foolish.”

“What?”

“Laughing is I see you in shame.”

“Aquare, I don’t feel—”

“Laughing is pretense attack, all knowing is pretense,” the almost uninflected voice, with its background of soft squeaks and gurgles, went on. Dom Felix stopped trying to respond and began

simply listening, trying to follow.

“Laughing is hiding afraid. Laughing is you unhappy; I happy I am not you.” (Dom Felix realized at last that Aquare was making a list.) “Laughing is I give you happy then I happy with you. Laughing is I sudden-quickly admire. Laughing is I see I have no word to say. Laughing is I have no word to say, cannot find word to say, no not ever and must say no more. Laughing is more-more-more.” *Chirp-chirp*.

“Ah,” said Dom Felix. “What you’re saying is that there are many kinds of laughter and that it can mean many different things. You couldn’t be more right. Whole big books, whole studies, have been done about laughter. So ... why were you laughing at me?”

“Sudden-quickly admire. Again. More.”

“Well, thank you, Aquare. I really don’t know what I might have done to earn it.”

“All. So far.”

“So far. You mean I’m on the right track? Going in the right direction?”

“What is right.” There was no inflection to indicate that this might be a question, but what else, thought Dom Felix, could it be? What is right? What is right, for whom, under what circumstances, and, in the sweep of growth and change, for how long? *What is right?* That was a big one.

He laughed. *Laughing is I have no word to say*, and the Medean chirped right along with him.

They sat for a while in companionable silence. In his many encounters with the strange Medean—and he realized there had been a great many recently, an increasing number, as he moved about dropping his seeds of Acceptance—he had noticed that he was quite comfortable with the silent, brief appearances and with the conversations, short and long, shallow and deep, as they occurred, but also with the “being together” kind of association. “Being-together,” he murmured.

Chirp-chirp-chirp-chirp.

Wallich came in. “Dom Felix, I—oh.”

Chirp-chirp. Aquare unfolded himself from his squat by the wall and went away.

“I hope I didn’t—”

“He was just leaving anyway,” Dom Felix overrode her. (How

had he known that? Had he known that?) He had no time to think it through; words tumbled from the girl.

"I didn't ask anybody. I mean I did, but it wasn't anybody, it was the Central. I guess if you hadn't warned me, I'd have wandered in and asked Jeth or Harrick or someone else in Gengineering, but I didn't. I went to the computer, and you know what?"

"I think I do."

"It just read out EP. I asked it if sterility was the result of characteristic injection, and I got EP. I asked if DNA redesign necessarily resulted in sterility, and it said EP. I asked the same question from every possible direction, and that's all I got—EP, EP, EP."

"I don't know what EP means."

"Oh. Established Procedure. But you know that's a dumb answer. That isn't an answer at all!"

"That's right."

"It's as if Central was programmed to answer any question like that that way."

"That's right."

"How did you know, Dom Felix?"

"I didn't know. It's just—well, it had to be that way. Vags and Gengies and Mules—excuse me—and all that fear. There had to be something people just didn't know. That kind of fear always comes from something people just don't know. In this case it isn't this group or that group that doesn't know. Nobody knows. So everybody's suspicious and afraid. Tell me something, Wally, about Established Procedure. Who established it?"

"Oh, who knows? Gengineering's been done on Medea for a hundred years, and the procedures were coded back on Terra before that. The only variations we do here have to do with characteristic design: physical, mental, and not an unlimited number of those. The basic procedures—what produces a whole human being—well, they just are, that's all."

"The word for that is *tradition*," said Dom Felix, "and that brings about the rule of the dead hand. Wally, the reason I asked you to be careful in your questioning is that I thought we had stumbled on a deep, dark, deadly plot." His smile came and went. "It isn't. It's the dead hand. It's people who did right things the right way a long time ago. But the things they did lived after

them, the same things, the same way, while the world and the universe changed around them. Ask Altair about Marxism and revisionism. Ask him about Catholicism and Luther. The greatest movers and shakers our species has ever known, the greatest thinkers, have, one and all, done one inexcusable, thing: they died, and their accomplishments froze at that moment. Nothing in the universe ever stops except the human politic, the human solution to this problem or that. And when we stop, we fail. Stopping is the only unnatural thing there is; every force in nature, every object in the universe is in motion, changing, changing...." His mind re-echoed Aquare's almost uninflected *What is right? Nothing*, he thought, *is right in all ways, for always*. He was on his feet. "I'm going to the Big Chief." And he did, a bright-eyed black bullet, leaving a honey-haired technical synthesist staring after him in astonishment.

And somewhere out in the blowing dusk that is daytime on Medea, on his way back to his city, an Arcan brushed his hands together: *Chirp. Chirp. Chirp-chirp*.

Stop and let me be you—the gesture of Acceptance—had yeasted through the enclave by the time the Big Chief passed the word, the final word that forever lubricated the dangerous friction between the factions. It was—had been, rather—the secret of secrets, the psychological dynamite that might well have blown the human colonies to fragments, blowing in Medea's treacherous winds, for arriving ships to find and wonder at. The secret was simply that sterility was not the price of special aptitude, that in the production of a Truform from normal human genes, sterility was accomplished in one programmed operation in the DNA alteration and the applied special aptitude in quite another. In other words, the sterility was not at all necessary in the case of any individual, but it was essential to all. For without it the new trait was heritable, and the alteration of the gene pool was inevitable and unpredictable. To maintain the special ties Medea felt toward the mother planet, the possibility of a genuine alteration of species was unthinkable; so the Truforms were simply not permitted to breed. Yet their every other human attribute was preserved, for the sake of harmony on the colonies. It seemed an obvious and simple solution, and it was just on the point of failure when Dom Felix arrived. It must fail because it

was an imposed solution; any solution imposed on a segment of humanity must fail eventually. Only government by consent of the governed can survive.

To explain this to the colonists at the outset might well have been impossible: to have this knowledge freely given to an Accepting society dissolved all tensions. To empathize, to feel with another's fingertips, and to see out through his eyes was the purpose of Acceptance and the means to its ends.

And Dom Felix wrought his miracle in just under four Terran months. And the Big Chief said to Dom Felix, "Now tackle the Arcans."

"They're just altogether goddam standoffish," Altair II explained to Dom Felix. "I can almost understand their not offering us anything they have. But it just doesn't make sense for them not to take anything we offer. It would be all profit for them, no loss. We've designed ground transportation for them, for example, protective side arms, boots to keep them from being bitten by the wildlife around here. But no, there they go, bare toes, on foot, at the mercy of these crazy winds and the crazy bugs and beasties. Don't think they gave us the winghouses. We observed them, we copied them, we engineered them our own way. But they never offered a thing."

"What about that city of theirs? What do they do there?"

"Nothing! I mean, I really and truly kid you not. Nothing. First of all, Arca is not a city. I'd call it some sort of a shrine if I thought for a moment they had a religion or some sort of reverential philosophy, but they haven't, or, if they have, it's not visible to the naked eye. What do they do? Nothing! They sit around, that's what they do. If you have a chance to go there, don't bother. Central can give you all the holo's you can take; if suicide is your hobby, you can bore yourself to death with them. Nothing's changed over there in the past century. They just sit there—no talk, no music, no rituals, and certainly no fun and games. No agriculture, no trade, no manufacturing. Every now and then a dozen or so get up and leave, walk away single file up into the mountains. Every now and then a dozen or so will walk back in. Whether they're the same ones or not, there's no way of knowing. They don't wear clothes or decorations; so how can you tell who's boss, or chief, or whatever? They don't use weapons,

not even a pointed stick. They maintain Arca pretty much by hand. I must admit, they can do a hell of a lot with hands like those. And they just sit.”

“What about Aquare?”

“By now you know as much as anyone—maybe more. He’s spent more time with you than he ever has with anyone. Maybe he’s some sort of freak. Maybe he’s the only Arcan ever born who ever had a hobby, and we’re it. One thing’s sure: he’s the only one who can talk to us, or ever did. You can bet that as soon as we had that translator functioning we made more—over a hundred. We thought it was a real breakthrough, that we’d hold conferences, that we’d find specialists, that we had a short line to their history and their culture and their science, if any, to say nothing of their knowledge of the local wildlife.

“Well, forget it. We fixed up a harness for Aquare to tote some of ’em back to Arca, and he just politely wouldn’t. ‘There is no need.’ That’s all he would say about it. ‘There is no need.’ So we trundled them out to Arca in a convoy of cycles. Tried to hand them out. The Arcans wouldn’t take ’em. So we just had to pile them up and leave them there. They just left them where we put them, till they got kicked around and mostly lost. Bet there are still some lying around there.”

“What about Aquare?” Dom Felix asked again. “I’ve never really talked to him about Medea or the Arcans. Maybe he has ... by God, he has led the conversation away from that. But there was always so much to talk about. A kind of philosophy that, well, that I can touch but not grasp.”

“Oh. sure. I know just what you mean. But, hell, he isn’t human, and it would be stupid to expect him to think like one.” Altair said. “But he’s been no help whatever in the nuts-and-bolts of local flora or fauna or weather or, damn it, anything. Big Chief we had before, he got so sore about that that he locked Aquare out, forbade him the premises. Aquare didn’t ask why then or ever, didn’t go away, stood out there in the wind for weeks until the old chief relented and let him back in. And he didn’t ask why then, either.” He shook his head. “But if you can make that Acceptance trick work on the Arcans, there’s no end to the good it will do. How long do you think it takes us to learn as much about Medea as anyone of those hop-toads could tell us in a single hour of real communication? Months, years, maybe.”

“And while you’re bringing diverse species together,” Altair added abruptly, “see what you can do about Wallich. She and I used to fun around a lot, and I don’t mind telling you, I miss her.”

“You don’t see her much?” Dom Felix was surprised, but then, he had been busy.

“I don’t see her ever! Not since the day you were defrosted. She’s around you all the time and doing her own work as well.”

“She’s been a great help. There’s something very special about her. I’d give anything for her grasp of, well, of everything.”

Altair nodded. “A synthesist. She was sired by one, a Truform. Also a synthesist. Designed for it. but I do believe she’s better than he was. There’s only one head in this whole place that can compare with her, and that’s your friend Kert Row. Seems kind of stupid, well, childish, you know what I mean? But he is to technology what Wally is to theory. A supergenius. It isn’t what they know, which is plenty. It’s how they think.”

Dom Felix nodded. “It absolutely awes me. Well, if you like, I’ll sound her out.”

“I wish you would. Truth is. I’m surprised at myself. Never knew I’d miss her so much.”

Dom Felix went to Arca. He was wise enough (and experienced enough) to understand that though the ultimate fruition of his mission was far in the future, it was accomplished. He was wise enough also to separate this observation from wishful thinking, and to trust that it was so. But a man like Dom Felix cannot be stopped just because he is finished, and the suggestions by the Big Chief (as an offhand whimsy) and by the historian Altair II (as an excited and highly complimentary solid suggestion) were enough to make Dom Felix realize that here was his ultimate challenge, and he rose to it. To bring Acceptance, not only between factions of humanity, not only between what seemed to be species and subspecies of humanity, but actually between humanity and another species entirely—this would be the achievement of his life.

He sat willingly, and then grimly, through endless hours of holo reports on expeditions to Arca, going back 112 terrayears, and, indeed, Altair II had been right when he said that nothing ever happens there. Once there had been a seism and a rift that tore almost a third of the central building away, and that created

some interesting visuals as the Arcans, virtually without tools but for simple levers and a sort of hod with straps to carry materials, swarmed over the structure like disturbed ants and repaired it with surprising speed. The commentary at that point drew attention to something Dom Felix had already noticed—that each individual seemed capable of doing any task with the same degree of skill, and that all worked together with no apparent direction from a leader. They made no sound but for increased breathing when the load was heavy; there was no audible or visible signal from one to the other. Ants, at least, stop and “greet” one another, touch antennae. Bees “dance” to inform the hive. If the Arcans had an equivalent, it was not (or not yet) detectible. When asked how they communicated, or if not, how they could cooperate with out communicating, Aquare droned, “There is no need,” through his translator, and, as he did so often, would not be budged further.

And on two occasions the sensitive airfoils of a winghouse were not up to the insane swirling of the Medean winds and the structure was damaged. Twice—in a century. He saw the ground cycles of the Terran expeditions arrive, and the Terrans exploring, testing, and trying desperately to communicate with the passive Arcans, and failing two years ago as they had failed repeatedly in the previous ninety. He saw the translators offered, refused (ignored is a better word) piled up and, on successive later viewings, gradually scattered and lost. And Altair’s comment that nothing ever happens in Arca turned out to be only too true. The main hall and its power had changed virtually not at all since the first recordings. Outbuildings came and went, but not much. A dozen or a score of Arcans would file out once in a while, and could be seen trudging away into the mountains until the “thick light” obscured them. A dozen or a score would file out of the mountains and into the hall—whether or not they were the same ones there was no way of knowing. There was no noticeable sex differentiation and there were no young. “There is no need,” Aquare explained. (Explained?)

Until Dom Felix had absorbed all the information there was (and to do that without spending a lifetime, he had to ask the computer to report only changes and to delete all repetition) he kept his plans to himself, and absorbed a part of his mind with devising ways and means to persuade Aquare to guide him to

Arca. Physical, geographical guidance was unnecessary, and there would certainly be no resistance or interference from the Arcans, but he liked to think he had formed some sort of bond with the ubiquitous creature, and that he could expand if not exploit it. Some of his plans were quite elaborate, starting with subtlety and sidling into the suggestion that he visit Arca and that Aquare accompany him. Many of them were scenarios of how the Arcan could be manipulated into suggesting it himself, together with Dom Felix's reluctance and gradual persuasion. Always he encountered the difficulty of dealing with the creature who thought quite as well as a human but not *like* a human. In the end he decided to start from the top, or the bottom, or however one might describe irreducible directness, and he said,

"Aquare, I want to go to Arca and I want you to go with me."

And Aquare performed the bubbly squeak which emerged from his translator as "Yes." Dom Felix, totally prepared and tensed for a long campaign of trial and error, regrouping and flanking, almost physically stumbled, like a man running up seven steps when the architect had put only six in the flight. Ask him what it was he fell over.

Altair (after having said the inevitable "what the hell for?") told him he would have to start Aquare out first and drive out a couple of terradays later, because no Arcan had ever agreed to ride on a cycle, and the only alternative would be to hoof it with Aquare, which no human in his right mind would attempt, not on Medea. Aquare, who was present at this interchange, mumbled and squeaked and his translator said, "I ride," and it was Altair's turned to fall over the step that wasn't there.

The cycle—and it was a new one, equipped with a stable platform Kert Row had designed—required very little instruction. The route to Arca had been scanned many times before, and was not only visible depicted on a large screen, but was compared with the scanned reality as it traveled, so that any change—a boulder on the path, for example, or an animal over a certain size, or an Arcan pedestrian, would be noticed, alerted, and avoided instantly and automatically. There was no speed control as such, but a simple Go and STOP lever and on-off OPTIMUM button. With this in the on position, speed was a safe balance between performance and terrain. There were manual overrides for both speed and steering, but it would be hard to imagine a

situation in which they would be useful.

The machine was in constant communication with the enclave, not only with the ever-ready voice transmitter, which, though it could be turned off, would turn itself on again in even the slightest emergency, but with a locator signal which had no override. It was powered by a battery that, for surface travel, was virtually inexhaustible and that could leap the machine for several days before it required recharging sufficiently to leap again. The leaps, ten to twenty meters at a time, were undertaken only when the vehicle's computers decided they were safe with all variables scanned: speed, slope, planned course, obstacles, and especially the wind. The strange, surging gait of this machine had become traditional in the enclave, even working its way into some love poetry; it (the gait, not the poetry) was exhilarating to some Terrans, soothing to others, and absolutely nauseating to a few. Kert Row's refinement had lessened all these phenomena. It had yet to work its way into literature.

Two and a half days of foot-slogging for an Arcan equaled two and a half hours for the cycle, and Dom Felix was surprised to find that his burnoose was all the equipment he needed, and that departure time was completely up to him, since the holo's had informed him (and informed and informed him) that the Arcans observed no special sleep time. He was pleased at the discovery, although there was a child-like quantum of disappointment in him that there were no safari-like preparations, no crowds waving goodbye from the gate, or a delegation to travel the first kilometer with them, no leis around their necks, nothing to speed them on their way except (from three different sources) "Going to Arca? What the hell for? Nothing ever happens at Arca." They simply walked out of the fifth corridor, the Rim of Pellucidar, battled their way across the dusky, blustery compound to the motor pool where the cycle, with its whispering gyros and its gleaming transparent canopy, awaited them. (It was Dom Felix who battled. Aquare's short flat fur was infinitely better suited to the pluckings and grabbings of Medea's whirling atmosphere than a flapping burnoose.) The attendant waited until they had reached the vehicle and had instructed Dom Felix to put one foot on the stirrup before he activated the canopy. It slid back just far enough to permit them to skin inside before it slammed shut, and even then it took half a minute for it to pump out the dust that

had whirled in with them. The course chip had already been plugged in, and the screen was illuminated; all Dom Felix had to do was to push the Go lever. As the machine wheeled around to nose into the plotted course, he saw the attendant scurrying back to the shelter; the fellow didn't even wave. "Well," he said inanely, "here we go." Aquare apparently did not feel that this called for a response. They sat side by side in silence while the cycle ascended and settled, slid and surged its sibilant way. They flashed past the strident cool air of the Terran fields, a light so very different from the many glows natural to Medea, and on into the shifting dusk of the backcountry.

For a while Dom Felix attended to the passing scene, but it became an effort; there is a sameness to the many differences in the topography of Medea, and it is not easy even while standing still for Terran eyes to take in detail. Bounding and sliding across and through it defeated the hope of seeing a spectacular formation or a fleeing animal, and the stable platform robbed the rush along a side-hill or the mounting of a slope of its reality. The Terran eye is magnetized by brightness, and he found himself paying more attention to the screen before him than to the view outside; it was like looking at a line drawing of the Mona Lisa instead of at the painting itself, and somehow, to his own irritation, finding that more satisfactory.

He was aroused from these confusing thoughts by a touch on his shoulder, and he turned to Aquare.

The Medean pointed his two long central fingers at the panel before him, where a small plate glowed green. He made a slight stabbing motion toward it. Dom Felix realized several things at once: first, that never, not once, even by accident, had Aquare ever touched him; the contact on his shoulder was so extraordinary that, light as it had been, and brief, he still felt its residual. Second, the control he indicated was the voice communicator to the enclave. Third, he was (also for the very first time) conveying something with gestures rather than speaking through his translator. Dom Felix quelled the reflex to blurt out a question, and spread his hands: *What do you want?*

Again Aquare stabbed toward the green-glowing plate. Dom Felix reached toward it—slowly, lest this not be what was meant—until he touched it. It immediately turned red, with a diagonal line: by ancient tradition, OFF.

"Aquar—" But before the whole name was out, the Medean shot out a commanding hand, an unmistakable message. Dom Felix shut up. To his astonishment Aquare squatted on the deck in front of his feet and with the powerful beak in the palm of his hand drew out a locking pin. A panel came ajar; he opened it and reached inside. He did not fumble; he seemed to know exactly what to do. There was a faint click, and he rose up and sat back.

Dom Felix stared at him in utter astonishment. He had never seen Aquare operate a machine or device of any kind, and nothing Wallich or Altair had ever said about him hinted that he might have any comprehension of one. Further, nothing in those endless holo's had demonstrated tool use, beyond the wedge and the lever, those powerful and flexible hands, and whatever instinctive, possibly programmed genius for design it took to build the winghouses (significantly, a single and repeated pattern) were really no more remarkable than the nest of the bower-bird, or a beaver dam, or a beehive. Yet here was Aquare, sitting back comfortably on the cushioned seat, chirping his mirth and saying authoritatively, "Can talk now. Automatic voice recorder also off."

"Aquare, you ... how ... I never knew...." Dom Felix stopped spluttering and tried again. "Why didn't you ever tell anyone that you—that you could—knew how to ..." He was spluttering again, so he stopped.

Chirp-chirp-chirp. "There was no need."

"Oh for God's sake, don't do that to me."

Aquare, quite relaxed, said nothing. He seemed to be waiting. Dom Felix looked up at the red-lit communicator switch, at the panel still ajar under the control board. *Can talk now*. Can talk without being overheard, without being recorded. "What is it you want to tell me, Aquare?"

Aquare turned toward him with his torso, averting his head, and again Dom Felix had to remind itself that the native did not have binocular vision. The turn of the body strangely intensified the feeling of being totally observed. The gentle burbling and moaning came through the translator as "You give confidence."

"Thank you." Something in Aquare's stillness told him that this was not quite right. He amended it. "If you mean what I think you mean—thank you."

"Not thank me. Wrong confidence." It came haltingly; these

were not words, apparently, that Aquare had used before.

Wrong confidence. What then would the right confidence mean? Make someone confident. Cheer someone up. Confidence ... oh, the kind of confidence you keep. "You mean, you have something to confide? That kind of—"

"Yes. No." A long pause. "I confide. You not talk."

"Go ahead. I won't interrupt."

The lithe hands came up and together; the beaks clashed, once. Not chirp this time—and this was another first; the very first time Aquare had exhibited impatience. "Confidence," he said at last. "I confide. You not talk. Never. Never. Never."

"Ah." It came to him in a rush. "Can I keep a confidence! Is that what you're asking? If you tell me something in confidence, can you trust me? Is that what you want to know? Is that why you—" he gestured, "—shut off the communicator and the recorder?"

"Confidence, yes."

"Well then. Aquare," Dom Felix said devoutly, "I give you my faithful word that whatever you say to me in confidence, I will never repeat to a single living soul."

"Soul." It was probably a question.

"I will never repeat a confidence to any person in any way."

"Never."

"Never."

Dom Felix set himself to receive revelations—shattering, amazing revelations. He watched in new astonishment as Aquare slipped off the seat, reached behind the panel, and turned on the recorder. He closed the panel, slipped in the locking pin, and gestured to Dom Felix to turn on the communicator. Dazed, Dom Felix did. (It was not until weeks later that he learned that such controls would respond only to the human hand, so designed that no falling object or carelessly placed cargo could activate it by accident; and that the Medean hand would not affect this type of switch. Just how much Terran technology did this creature understand?) He sat there staring at his companion and underwent a whole dizzying chain of reactions: disappointment, puzzlement, and when he opened his mouth to demand more information, anger, for the green listening glow of the communicator informed him that he could not do so without breaking the confidence he had so devoutly given only a moment

before. Then admiration at the sheer skill of the Medean's manipulation—even though he had been its ... subject? target? victim?... overcame him, and he laughed. He laughed, and Aquare chirped, and in good time they came to Arca.

The *holo's*, Dom Felix thought, *are just too damn good*. He was by no means the first to have that thought; it had been a common observation and occasionally a battlecry for over a century before he left Terra. Psychologists and educators had cried doom over that technological refinement for a long time, lamenting the increasing tendency of Terrans to lie personally dormant in the glow of their holo's, vicariously experiencing other places, other times for (sometimes) days at a time while automatic machines fed and massaged and evacuated them. It was argued on the one hand that the holo's expanded the mind and multiplied experience and understanding, and that as the artificial qualitatively approached the real, the copy the original, it would effectively be no difference at all, with the ultimate good on the side of the perfected imitation, for it eliminated all the perils of real experience.

On the other hand there always had been, there always would be, a portion of humanity which insisted upon its own real experience and was willing to run risks and pay the price of potential scars, agony and death. Or ridicule ... the whole matter being yet another indication of the effort of the human animal perennially to separate itself into disagreeable factions, necessitating the existence of such movements as Acceptance, which alone could prevent the species from stinging itself to death by its own poison like the scorpion.

These thoughts trickled through his mind as he sat on the slightly resilient floor with his back against the glossy, varnished wall of Arca's central building, the one with the aeronautical tower. Made entirely of the same material, light, strong, and composed of particles matted together in some way, the hall was bare of furniture of any kind. Irregularly placed patches of luminescence, part of the wall itself, glowed dimly, but there were so many that the light, at least on Medean terms, was adequate, though for a Terran it took some getting used to. Forty or so Arcans squatted against the walls or knelt or crouched out on the floor. He saw none lying down. Occasionally one would

rise and leave, presumably to eat.

The entire structure thrummed as it yielded to the ever-shifting pressures of the supporting wings, but due to the great size of the enclosed space, the overall note was far down toward the subsonic, and was felt rather than heard. There was also a perpetual susurrus, soft and sourceless, the result probably of particulate matter being constantly swept against and along the outside surfaces of the structure, the sound, absorbed and diffuse, delayed and mixed. It was like sitting inside a gigantic tympanum which was being energetically bombarded by snowballs made of absorbent cotton. There was no other sound, no speech, no song. There was no decoration, no art save for the beautifully poised substructures of the roof, but that was not so much art as engineering; a kind of visible logic, like the hexagonal form of a honey cell.

And all this, in depth and detail, had surrounded him for days in his research; he was completely familiar with every sight and sound and texture, and the difference between a holo and the actuality was slight indeed. It was this that brought up the thoughts of the function of holography in Terran culture, and “Going to Arca? What the hell for?”

He found out what the hell for.

Aquare, seated beside him, whimpered and burped into the translator, which said, “Food for you in cycle.” The almost-monotone sounded harsh and loud in the big hall. No Arcan indicated any response.

“Thanks, Aquare. I know. I’m not hungry just now.”

“Sleep.” Damn it, thought Dom Felix, isn’t it within the state of the art to design in some punctuation for that talk-box of his? *Sleep*. Would that be imperative, interrogative, informational, abstract, or something he hadn’t thought of yet? He took a chance and said, “I’m not sleepy either.”

Aquare said, “Confidence.”

The scene in the cycle rushed back. “Absolutely, Aquare. You have my word. You may trust me.”

“Trust. Yes.”

Silence again. How in time, thought Dom Felix, do you bring Acceptance to people who can’t, or anyway don’t, communicate with you and can’t, or don’t, or maybe don’t need to communicate with one another? They—

He gasped.

For perhaps fifteen seconds, he wasn't there at all—not on Arca, nor on Medea, nor anywhere else he had ever been or read about or been told about or holo'd.

The sky was white, dazzling, bright all over and brighter still at the distant horizon he faced. The ground was splintered rock, grays and browns nearby, smoky with distance as it receded. The land was treeless, and he grew on a high bluff, yearning toward the brightening horizon. All around them was a tinkling as the freezing wind, the good chill wind, moved his leaves and those of the other red-leaf, blue-vein plants around him. All bent toward the growing light, and spread. With a glorious flash the limb of the sun appeared, and as it rose it was very pale orange and its limb was enormous, a widening arc, huge and close and generous, profligate with the good, needed, orange light, pouring out across the prairie and shooting ahead of it long sharp shards and spears of shadow.

The ground shook and he was aware of the great creature which approached—an armored slug with many pairs of legs and heavy feet, and low-slung horizontal mandibles mowing across the crest of the bluff. It caught the red leaves, helpless in their starving dawn-time extension, and fed as it moved, scalping a swath out of the gravelly ground. He knew he was in its path; flight never occurred to his plant self, fear hardly at all, for fear was simply unreasonable. When the jaws closed on him there was regret, and oh yes, agony for a moment, and something else:

Acceptance.

Dom Felix tried to open his eyes and could not: he had not yet closed them. He began to pant, clawed for a moment at the floor and each side, started up away from the wall, and then had to pull down his cowl to wipe the sweat that poured down into his eyes. "What was that?"

Wordlessly, Aquare pointed to an Arcan hunkered against the wall to the right.

"I don't understand."

"Try."

... and he was weightless ... no, free was a better word, riding warm wind. He looked ahead and saw others of his kind with wide curved wings and white, clean bodies. He looked down a thousand meters to a sparkling blue sea speckled with whipped

foam. He looked across to his left and saw long line of birds like himself, eleven of them, and understood that they were flying in a V formation, strong and easy, somewhere to go, everything right.

He blinked, and was back in Arca.

Shaken, he said, "And they said nothing ever happens in Arca," and tried to laugh.

Chirp-chirp-chirp. The sound was strange there; none of the others did it.

"Aquare—please."

Aquare averted his strange head to look at Dom Felix. He said, "Come with me." But when Dom Felix started up, he stayed with the gesture, sat him back down.

... and they moved through a landscape, the Medean badlands, down from a mountaintop into a pocket canyon with a crooked little lake at the bottom. It was heavily overgrown with low shrubs of many kinds and long-limbed, reaching trees. The wind was rather more merciful here in the sheltered valley, and it was easier to see without the perpetual whirl of dust-devils and shrouding clouds that plagued the coastal plains of the Ring Ocean. Dom Felix was Dom Felix now, not a plant or bird; he sensed the presence of Aquare beside him and was aware surprisingly without surprise, but they were both invisible to one another, and to whatever, whomever, might be in the valley to see.

An animal was snuffling into a bush, whether to browse or to hunt, Dom Felix could not be sure. It was somewhat larger than a Terran fox; it was six—no, eight-legged, with the segmented body covered with fine red fur. As it backed out of the underbrush, Dom Felix could see two small limbs hanging from the base of the neck, which was upthrust like the neck of a llama; the limbs were smaller and more slender than the legs, rather like the forelimbs of a kangaroo.

As they watched, another animal of the same species—or was it? It was larger, with longer forelimbs equipped with clawlike fingers, and—yes, it had only four legs and a short, straight, thick tail; a sort of centaur; this creature, without preliminaries, flung itself on the back of the first, digging its claws into the front of the first body segment, and began to copulate enthusiastically. Ah. Male with four legs, female with eight.

Everything seemed to mist over, and return again to clarity. A very small portion of Dom Felix's mind was amazed at this combination within him of intense observation and uncritical acceptance. *Watch now, think later.*

There was a change in the Valley, probably seasonal, part of the complex gumbo of Medean weathers to which, as in all of its kind, the vegetation had learned to accommodate. Bushes seen before were now leafless; new vines were rioting up the trees, which had dressed themselves for some new occasion. Clearly some time had passed.

Again he saw the two animals. The male hovered alertly near her. She had changed distinctively. Her hindquarters had blown up grossly, and the last pair of legs seemed barely able to support them, and had lost some of their mobility, so that they dragged rather than lifted. She seemed fairly unconcerned as she rooted among the underbrush.

Suddenly the male spun about and froze, alert, his forelimbs up and its claws splayed way some crabs alert for danger. Down the slope toward him galloped a second male, ready apparently to crash straight into the first. At the last possible instant he swerved, lashing out with his right hind foot with a blow that would have disemboweled the other had it landed. But the animal guarding the female twisted deftly, avoiding the foot, and struck out with the forelimb, which seemed somehow to reach much farther than it should, and the taloned paw (hand?) struck the other a terrible blow in the back of the long neck, which, with the invader's downslope speed, serve to somersault him down the hill, to land sprawling and sliding. He got painfully to his feet and started back up, but the sight of the other standing there unscathed, his forelimbs out and fairly quivering with eager readiness, apparently made him think again. He stopped, pulled a leaf off of a bush, put it in his mouth, chewed for a moment, then turned and trotted away.

The other turned back to the female, who had regarded this knightly conflict with dull disinterest. She had other concerns. Her heavy hindquarters had collapsed the spindly legs, and she was numbly dragging it along the ground. Dom Felix felt an urge to help her, to stop her, to keep her from injuring herself, but he was invisible, he wasn't really there, was he?

Very concerned, he watched the stretching in the last body

section, down in the groove between it and the next; and he saw it split and bleed. The female kept dragging it laboriously along the ground, now headed toward the thicker underbrush, the male following watchfully. She stopped at last, rested, and then suddenly lunged. The entire back portion broke almost entirely away, except for the end of the spine. Another lunge, and she was free of it altogether. It lay there under the bushes, the little legs twitching. Surprisingly, there was not a great deal of blood.

The female stood panting, ignoring what lay under the bush, and Don Felix was horrified to see the male immediately fling himself upon her again, forelimbs and four legs holding her immobile while he penetrated her somewhere in the center of what seem more like a wound than anything else. He was soon finished and flung himself off, to go and stand by the discarded thing lying in the leaves. The female moved off, beginning to snuffle for food again; the male gave her not a glance.

Again the scene misted over and cleared. Obviously, time had passed again. The male had trodden much of the nearby ground, as if in restless pacing, and the thing under the bush had undergone changes. It was smaller overall, much of the excess fat gone from it. It was obviously still alive, though the legs had atrophied to crooked little sticks. They quivered, and now and again gave little convulsive jerks. The male approached it, staring intensely in its sideways way, and was apparently preoccupied when the attack came.

The second male (whether it was the one he had seen before or not, Dom Felix could not be sure) exploded on the scene as if from nowhere, landing on the first one's back and driving in a veritable blur of blows to the upright portion of the neck. The defender immediately fell and rolled over, dislodging the attacker. He gathered his forefeet under them and leapt straight up, to come down with fearful accuracy on the attacker's head. Two strong kicks finished the job. He sank down, panting, to rest for a moment and then crouched over the corpse. With a series of blows with the hard spurs in the center of his forelimbs, he cracked a line of cavitations along the crest of the skull, the way one might chip a line in a block of ice preparatory to cracking it in two. It was done with such expertise it appeared to be an old skill, or insect-like pre-programming. He then forced the long finger-like claws of both hands into the crack and strained. With

a snap the skull open like a book, and he plunged his face into it, gobbling.

Meanwhile the thing under the bush began to convulse in earnest, so much so that it actually turned over. One area of it—the half-healed, half-withered place where the spine had torn out—showed some agitation, and suddenly a sharp little probe appear from inside, followed by a second. These two whipped in toward the flesh, paused, trembling, whipped and tore again, until it could be seen that something was fighting its way out. As it gradually emerged and freed itself from the entanglements of what had to be the uterus, Dom Felix saw it to be a startlingly perfect miniature of the first female he had seen, with eight legs and two forelimbs with sharp little claws on them—the tools of its first emergence.

The male, blood and brains dripping from his long snout, stood over the—baby?—until it was almost out, and patiently pulled it the rest of the way. From the center of the abdomen, between the second pair of legs, extended a vein, or tube—clearly the umbilical cord. This he grasped in his long fingers and broke. The infant began to crawl, and in minutes, to lift its segmented body clear of the ground and walk. It waddled blindly over to the shelter of the nearest bush and began poking its snout into the leaves, trying to feed. The male grasped the cord from the ruin that was left from the birth, drew out a wrinkled, fist-size many-veined tissue, the afterbirth or true uterus. This he immediately devoured, and went his way.

Dom Felix followed him, shocked, nauseated, and fascinated. There may have been another swift misting; he could not be sure, but it seemed now to be a different and lower part of the valley, the lake nearer, the mountain shouldering higher. The male approached the same female he had seen before, dropping her rear segment; Dom Felix knew because she had only six legs, not eight. She was in the throes of dropping the last segment again.... *Aquare, do I have to go through this whole thing again?*

Apparently not; the scene misted and cleared, with just a glimpse of the male gulping down the afterbirth and the infant crawling away to the nearest shadows. Dom Felix found himself following the now quadrupedal female, apparently not at all the worse for wear, beginning to rear and cavort and leap like a young goat, for no reason at all except for the joy of it. It took

very little time for him to observe that this was female no longer, but a young, strong, immature, four-legged male.

The mist, and again the view of the adult male. He seemed to be having trouble keeping a steady gait as he trotted along the flat rock of the streambed above the lake. Suddenly he fell, tried to rise, could not. He lay for a while, gathering strength, and then twisted himself and began furiously attacking his own haunches as of plagued by absolutely intolerable itch. Twice he stopped to rest and shift his body so he could attack it again, when by an unbelievable twist and a spastic wrench he literally tore off his own useless hindquarters. He fell back, gasping, now a biped with the spine now a long tail; and the dead hindquarters unmistakably carried with them the male organs.

At length the creature got to its feet, took a few tottering steps and but for a quick stoop and a touch on the ground with one of the wiry forelimbs, would have fallen. It tried again, with a little more success, and very soon was walking almost upright—weakly, certainly, but with increasing certainty.

The mist: then a mature, bipedal adult, perched on a rock, staring off into the distance. Under the rock, another, contemplatively chewing on a melon-like fruit. A third, poking along a stream-bed apparently looking for whatever might be edible there. A young adult male emerged from the undergrowth and stood on the bank looking at the biped and licking his lips. The biped slowly raised both forelimbs and covered its head with them, upon which the others, on and around the big rock, came down, moving carefully and steadily, to gather around the one in the stream. The male stared at them, they stared back, and then the male reared, turned and trotted off. The bipeds watched him go, and then went back to their contemplations.

The mist, then Arca.

How long had it taken? Dom Felix had no chronometer with him; there was one out in the cycle, but he was not moved to go for it. Judging by the indices of hunger and thirst, he felt no more and no less than he had when that first vision exploded on him. "Aquare, what are you doing?"

"Answering."

Answering what? He hadn't asked anything. "Yes you ask," rasped the translator. "From defrost you ask, all day, all time."

Then “Aquare! I didn’t say anything! Can you read my mind?”

“Do not know read.”

“Do you know what I’m thinking when I don’t talk?”

“Confidence.”

Dom Felix was a little nettled at this. “I have promised and I’ll stick to it. Do you know what I’m thinking?”

Aquare droned: “Filthy little cannibalistic vermin. Also how the hell. Also what is he doing to me fear.”

“Should I fear?”

“Is no should. It is only is.”

With a touch of exasperation, Dom Felix rephrased it. “Did you—do you intend to do me any harm?”

“No harm. It may be hurt. Just truth.”

“The truth cannot hurt,” said Dom Felix triumphantly.

Chirp-chirp-chirp.

“Not with Acceptance, it can’t,” said Dom Felix in his Q.E.D. tone.

“Filthy little cannibalistic vermin is acceptance.”

Dom Felix suspected, and rightly, a question mark on that one. “Aquare, I make no moral judgments on animal behavior. I do reserve the right to express disgust at what I find disgusting. You still haven’t told me how you do this, what those—those pictures are.”

“All sentient intelligences can do.”

“Well, I can’t.”

Aquare said nothing. The nothing lasted a long time, and the more Dom Felix replayed that interchange, the more flustered he became. He did what he was trained to do: he confronted. “I think you just said I am not a sentient intelligence.”

“Yet.”

“I can learn it, then. Here? From you?”

“Good.”

Steaming, Dom Felix thought his thoughts.

“Not arrogance. Truth,” responded the Medean, just as if Dom Felix had spoken aloud.

This could get to be a real nuisance. Hastening to safer ground: “What were those—uh—pictures I saw, the place with the white sky, the one with the birds?”

“Not pictures. Is real.”

“Somewhere on Medea?”

“Not on Medea.”

“The birds, that sea—that looked like Terra.”

“Is Terra.”

“How long ago?”

“Is now.... You don’t believe.”

“Of course I don’t. It takes a beam of light fifty terrayears to travel that far!”

“This not light. This is now.”

It was at this moment that the Receiver was born.

“Can you show me Terra again—Terra now?”

With one sweep of his head, Aquare scanned the entire chamber. “No one is being on Terra now.”

I thought not. Wishing he could retract the thought, Dom Felix said, “I’d like you to explain that.”

“This is place of reward. Arcans safe here. Arcans come, sit, be far places. Be any sentient intelligence, anywhere, now.” Sensing Dom Felix’s perplexity he apparently decided to expand. “Reward,” he said again. “Difficult life. Near end, come here, sit, be anywhere. Enough, go back, end.”

A sort of shrine, retreat. He had the exasperating sense of almost understanding. “Aquare, why are you telling me this—me, when you have told no one else?”

In answer, Aquare mimicked the Acceptance gesture, hand on hand, hands raised, head bowed. It looked very strange when he did it. “You have Acceptance idea. You say, be him. Be her. Be some other. One step away, Be bird on Terra. Be plant on white-sky place, no have name. I say before, maybe you very very great Terran. Maybe you most great Terran. Maybe you make all Terrans be any sentient intelligence anywhere, now.”

“I’m sorry: I have to take this very slowly. You can teach me to live as—to be some other creature, see and feel what they are seeing and feeling right now, instantaneously? And then I could teach it to anyone else?”

“If you very great Terran. Yes. If no, no.”

“You’re not teaching me—you’re testing me!”

“Both.”

“Go ahead then. I have to tell you—I’m damn interested but I’m not convinced.”

“You want see more—” the final word was not a word, but the

flash of the picture—the quadruped male.

“Lord, no. I’ve had enough of that. Why did you give me that ... that natural history lesson anyway?”

The answer came in pictures: the naked Terran, then, beside it, a child. No, not a child, a tiny, stooped, spindly, hairy humanoid, like—not like, it *was* Australopithecus. The “dawn man.”

The figures remained. Beside them, an Arcan, perhaps Aquare himself, and beside it, the small, long-snouted, long-tailed Medean biped. The pictures held, obscuring all else, until it came to Dom Felix: “You’re descended from that—that creature!”

The pictures faded, and Dom Felix rubbed his eyes, though it had not been with his eyes that he had seen them. Oh, my God, *filthy little cannibalistic vermin*. He said sincerely, “Aquare, I *am* sorry. I couldn’t be sorrier. I—I’m sure Australopithecus had some pretty awful habits too.” He made the gesture.

He thought Aquare was about to return it but it was something else—the long fingers pointed across the hall to a squatting Arcan against the far wall. “Is Terra.”

Dom Felix’s vision was swept away before it could cross the room, to be replaced by that extraordinary sense of being ...

... of being strong and swift and perfectly adapted, and imbued with a sense of health and joy surpassing anything he had ever known. Sleek, streamlined, moving as if choreographed in the best of company: see them curving up out of water and swimming in air, the friends, the lovers, with their permanent smiles and their radiation of joy. This, however, was infinitely more than the ineffable rightness of red leaves in a white sky and the good hunger for pale orange light, more than climbing the wind on the way to a home-calling. A dolphin is more than a plant or bird; a dolphin lives in more than speed and foam and joyfulness. To the five senses add a dozen more, some even now without names; touch and speak with them, live in them, weave them to intricacies beyond human comprehension. No living thing exists more immediately, more intimately with its here and its now than the dolphin; few are in closer contact with that timeless and continuing Self which appears dimly and flickering in some humans as what it is called ‘racial memory’, but which is, in the dolphin, a total presence. In that sense all dolphins are one dolphin, and have been ever since, by conscious decision, and for good reasons, they returned to the sea from their evolutionary

adolescence on shore.

The “allness” of all dolphins in space and time, is an analog and a microcosm of the unity of sentience throughout the universe. High evolutionary development is not a certification of membership in this unity; far and away most of its elements are no more advanced than the veined red foliage of the world of the white sky, yet have and permit access to other sentience from anywhere. Because of this, red plant and joyous dolphin share one basic: the fusion with this great Unity is prime, and individual self-survival is secondary. A dolphin will fight to the death to free itself from the net, but when the death comes, it is a little more importance than the loss of dead skin-cells from the greater body—to itself or to others of its kind. What it had when it was an individual was shared. When the individual is no more, the sharing endures and is immortal.

Much of this—because there is so much—escaped Dom Felix’s grasp, but would leave its mark on him permanently. What overrode it was the sight of the city.

The city nestled in a small deep cove flanked by pillars of rock—a huge one on the north side and a much taller, slender spire on the south. Most of the city was white, and conforming architecture with curved walls and slightly domed roofs, and overlooking it, perched on the cliffs which formed the backdrop to the town were linked white buildings—nine of them.

Dom Felix knew that city intimately—had lived much of his Terran life in it, had involved himself deeply in its designed growth—most particularly in the chain of buildings atop the clips. The Research Center, and Acceptance Headquarters. There was certainly no mistaking it; the city was unique on all Terra. What filled him with astonishment and incredulity was that there, real and gleaming and complete, and, in addition, with that weathered look of something established and used rather than band-box new, were nine buildings—nine, when he had, on departure, said his farewells to four, some design plans, and some graded ground-plans which would take half a careful century to complete.

He had given credence to these overwhelming Arcan experiences, and was aware of very little doubt as to the reality of these wonders, or that they might be other than what Aquare said they were. What he now saw in his dolphin self was something

that can hardly be a dolphin's concern, but was monumentally his: the projected construction on the cliffs was now complete, had been completed during the fifty-one years of his passage to Medea.

Therefore he was, he really was, looking at Terra now; he was looking at a faster-than-light transmission.

Humanity has always responded to that spur. Prove that anything can be done, and humanity will find a way to do it, even if that way is not the same way. Witness the Terran winghouses. Witness man's flight: man learned that he could not fly like the birds, but he found a way to fly—and that way was higher and faster.

(But ... always higher and faster?)

City and sea faded; the high arc of the dolphin's leap in its multiplied awareness left him suspended in Arca, overwhelmed—so much so that when Aquare spoke to him twice without a response, he relaxed in the typical timeless stillness of Arcan meditation, ready to wait for however long it might take.

Dom Felix rose from his own depths at length, and said, "I need to know more." Simple words, with layer upon underlayer of inspiration, urgency, fascination, and successive explosions of planning.

"Yes."

Vision upon vision, with the swift partitions of mists between them:

Arcans, single file, toiling through the badlands toward the mountains.

The Entry (not an Arcan word; the Arcans have no words)—not so much a cave-mouth or doorway but a myriad of overhangs, cavities, entrances which soaked up the pilgrims like a thread of water falling on a sponge.

Underground (of course underground! Would not a high culture, but a non-technological culture, find for itself some environment of continuity, not subject to the hellish attacks of Medean weather? And of course the Terran enclaves, preoccupied with their own survival, were as yet unaware of it!)—underground, the city, the country of the Arcans. Here was their agriculture (largely fungoid) and their animal husbandry, caged and corralled creatures of great variety, feed and excreta neatly

sequenced through the farming, or its analogs. Here was their industry, such as it was, tools being hands and pincers, powerful limbs, sheer numbers, and that strange ability, uncaptured, to team—to move in concert or individually with near-perfect synchronization. It was largely a silent city, completely nonverbal, for they apparently had something better—something, at least, better for them; and they had as little use for machines as they had for words.

Here were the young and the females—and an explanation for the almost total similarity of all the Arcans Dom Felix had yet seen. The inhabitants were anything but similar to one another. The infants had ten appendages, and so had all the young until adolescence. Dom Felix was led to many scenes of regularization, organization, and ritual, most of which he could not begin to understand, but which he could acknowledge as their schools, their religious institutions, and their conventions. He saw no hospitals, and few injured or maimed individuals, though once or twice a damaged or even amputated part obviously healing, even regenerating. It occurred to him that a species evolved from those creatures he had seen in the pocket-valley, promethean as they were, undergoing successive metamorphoses in each single lifetime, may well have regenerative abilities. As far as sicknesses were concerned—anything that survived on Medea was by that definition a prime survival type, and anything that had not killed them off by now, could not.

He saw courtship, and the choosings—a far cry from the coarse brutality of the couplings of the primitives; and once he was aware of those, he had to notice that only six-legged females were so wooed.

He began to recognize something akin to a family grouping; a centaur-like male, a six-legged female, an infant. Sometimes there were two males, one invariably older than the other.

When familiarity began to replace curiosity and confusion, Dom Felix was introduced to the more intimate and—could one say “sacred?”—aspects of the city’s life.

He saw the metamorphoses, each surrounded by gentle ritual: the first birthing, which apparently changed the child into the marriageable female, and its two phases, the parting of the last body-segment, and the care and guarding it went through until its moment came and it delivered, witnessed in joy by the entire

“family,” and (ritual echoing of a far-past biology) the delivery of the afterbirth to the male. Then the second birthing, which changed bride into male centaur, and the delivery of this afterbirth to the father of the new child.

Then the ritual of departure for the new centaur, no longer wife and mother, now single and free and male and ready to seek a wife.

And at last the ordeal of final metamorphosis—the separation of the male segment of the centaur, and the appearance of the Arcan bipeds known to Terrans—the totally mature, the completed.

It crossed Dom Felix’s mind that this was a treasure trove—that the likes of Altair II, anthropologists, comparative culturologists, would give anything in life to be able to study these people. The word “confidence” intruded so immediately and so forcefully on his reverie that he was snapped back to his presence in Arca, with Aquare beside him, and it frightened him. He looked at the impassive figure, fervently wishing that the Medean was capable of some sort of expression, of body language, of some way of coloring his flat messages, but there was none except for the feeling within Dom Felix that the creature was angry—angry at even the beginnings of the thought that the confidence might be violated.

No words passed at that point; Dom Felix’s regret at his own half-formed thought, and the devout renewal of his promise, were sufficient. Or—perhaps Aquare needed the reinforcement, not because of the wayward thought, but for the revelations he was about to make.

The visions resumed.

There was a gathering of the bipeds, the Arcans he had known, and how the population watched the procession toward the place Dom Felix had called Entry. The bipeds filed through the entire city, with their arms strangely held with the forearms resting on their heads (where had he seen that before?) until they emerged on their way to the shrine, when they took them down.

There was the first copulation, performed on the maturing child by the head of the household, the centaur.

There was the solemn ingestion, after the first child was born, of the afterbirth by the father.

There was a similar ritual by the female’s mate after the second

birth.

And then, and then ... and then there was the return pilgrimage to the city....

Dom Felix once read an account of the Parsis, or Parsees, an East Indian sect, written toward the end of the first millennium. They were a highly cultured people, and many of them traveled to other countries and achieved high places in government and industry. And no Orthodox Parsi failed to plan his life and his affairs otherwise than to return home to die, or failed to make arrangements to have his body return should he die abroad. No Parsi escaped the curious, the intrusive, the impolite, the polite questioning about the details of a Parsi funeral, nor was unaware of the distaste, even horror, that these details evoked in other lands. No Parsi was so cultured, so civilized, so excellent in all his accomplishments nor so polished in his manners that he could eliminate this pall on his presence; the matter was certain to emerge soon or later, and certainly more than once.

And this was the manner of a Parsi funeral: after the final services, the body was wrapped in cloth and laid on a litter and born to a great stone tower, cylindrical, with no roof. The bearers would unlock and open a door at the bottom, carry their burden through a welter of broken dry bones to center of the enclosure, set it down and leave as quickly as they possibly could.

At the approach of the funeral procession, the vultures began to clutter the sky, coming from everywhere to the tower, where they perched on the wall, more and more of them, fighting for places, wheeling and darting when at last there were none. And when the bearers left, the signal of the slam of the lower door sent the birds out, scores of them, sometimes hundreds, plummeting down the stone chimney in a screaming storm, to tear and devour the corpse in minutes.

Witnessing the procession of returning pilgrims from Arca, and the waiting population that silently met them, Dom Felix was forcefully reminded of the Parsi rites. For when they were all within the city, walking steadily and sedately in single file, this time without the strangely defensive placement of forearms on heads, there was—must have been—some silent signal, for the Medeans, one and all, of all ages and degrees of maturity, surged forward and fell on the pilgrims; but for the silence, it was, to Dom Felix's mind, the same as the swoop of the Parsi's vultures.

In moments the pilgrims were struck down, their heads cracked, their skulls torn open, and their brains scooped out and gulped down. The larger and stronger brought dripping handfuls to the smaller and weaker, until every individual had had some part. Then the corpses were taken up and carried away to be mulched and returned to the soil of the agricultural sections.

“God! Oh, my dear God ...” Dom Felix fell back on an old chant, to keep his feelings under rein until he could control them again. How much of them could be divined by the impassive Medean, he could not know.

“Can Acceptance accept,” said Aquare at length. Clearly, a question.

“Well, of course. Acceptance makes no judgments, especially on ani—I mean, other-species behavior.... Aquare, why do you—did they kill the pilgrims, the old ones?”

“For last sharing.”

“I don’t understand that.”

“You have see now all of us life, what we do, how we do.”

“But not why, Aquare.”

“Could be you not want why. Could be you know why, not want know.”

“There is nothing I don’t want to know!” Said Dom Felix, heatedly. “Now tell me: why were the old ones killed like that? What is the last sharing?”

To make later the—” (Flash of high flight, flash of red leaves under white sky.) “also the—” (Flash of reverent removal of an afterbirth, raising it to the lips of a centaur.) “together, give the seeing.”

“I’m trying hard to understand. Are you telling me that by eating the brains of your own kind, and by doing the same with an afterbirth, you can gain that power—to project visions, to see anywhere faster than light can go?”

“That is how. You also.”

“What you mean, me also?”

“Not so well perhaps. But can share from others.” Apparently sensing Dom Felix’s perplexity, Aquare went on: “You eat brain of music man, you make better music. You eat afterbirth painter woman, you paint more good.”

“Nonsense!”

“Not nonsense. I talked Terrans many-much, long time, little with one, little another, much much Altair. Terran can have see-far like Arcan, like many more many else place. Terran always say no, turn away. Terran see *sadhu*—is right, *sadhu*?”

“Holy man,” nodded Dom Felix.

“Terran see *sadhu*, *sadhu* have see-far, Terran say nonsense. Terran make medicine, medicine give see-far, Terran forbid take medicine, make medicine, study-learned medicine.”

“You’ve been talking to Altair, all right. I think you mean drugs, especially mind-altering drugs. They were regarded as dangerous—well, they *were* dangerous. So they were withdrawn, and research was stopped. But I don’t see—”

“Terran find other Terran eat Terran. Make stop.”

“Cannibalism! Of course we stop it!”

“No animal Medea, no animal Terra stop it. All eat kind but you kind. You breed sister.”

Dom Felix did not have a sister, almost said so, then realize Aquare’s words were not a statement, but a question. “Would I mate with my sister? Certainly not.”

“All animal Terra, all Medea, mate sister, daughter. All animal Terrans make for eat, make for work, Terrans breed sister-brother, father-daughter.”

“And you are telling me that if Terrans committed incest and cannibalism, they would have the—the see-far?”

“Yes.”

“Then,” said Dom Felix triumphantly, “why don’t our pigs and horses and tropical fish and cats and dogs have it?”

And Aquare intoned, “Many do.”

How to dead-end an argument, thought Dom Felix. He tried another tack. “Aquare, you haven’t answered my question. About the old pilgrims.”

“Yes I answer. You want answer more. Yes. You see Arcan born, eight legs, two arms. Is female. Make one young, drop last legs. Make one more young. Drop two legs. Is male. Soon mate, one, two, more times. Drop two legs. Is no more male. Is no more female. Is Arcan. In brain is self of all life, female self, mother self, woman-love self, male self, male-love self. In brain is all selfs of past Medean before. Now is Arcan, come to time of reward. Come Arca. Now after life of change, change, now no change, now rest. Now stay still, see-far to here-place, there-place. Each

Arcan sometime find new place, share, share. Time comes to die. Old now. One more share to do. Go home. Last share.”

“Do they always make it back, the old ones? Suppose they die on the way?”

“All share.”

All share. Dom Felix could imagine it—the old Arcans gathering around a dying one on the trail, cracking the skull, slurping the brains, throwing the carcass off the trail.

“Acceptance.”

“If that was a question—of course Acceptance applies—acceptance of all you are and what you do. Do you doubt it?”

“Acceptance accepts Medean.”

Dom Felix understood completely, and deliberately refused to respond to it. With great precision, Aquare had nailed the fact that Terra would not, probably could not, accept these practices for itself, no matter what the reward.

He had forgotten that speech was his convenience, not Aquare’s, and was not necessary to the Medean, who knew perfectly well what he thought and felt.

Aquare rose, and Dom Felix rose with them. Aquare said, “Arca here to be near Terrans. Be near, Aquare go to Terrans. Hope join Terrans in the see-far, hope Terrans learn joint sentience everywhere. No hope. No hope. Then come you. Is hope. Acceptance say all learn feel like all. I be you. I be you young old male female big little, anything. Is hope. Is hope. I bring you Arca, tell everything. You not most great Terran. You not great Terran. You only one more Terran. Is no hope. No hope.”

“Ask Altair why dolphins never bite.” And he took off his translator and threw it on the floor.

And Dom Felix stood for a long time after Aquare sat down against the wall, and spoke to him, and shouted at him, and picked up the translator and thrust it at him, but none of it made a difference; Aquare, like the rest of the Arcans, just sat. So Dom Felix returned to the enclave alone, to discover Wallich was pregnant with his child.

Altair II was a very old man to when the transfax writer got him by receiver from Terra. The historian was quavery and rambly, with occasional flashes of his wit and his ability to flip out aphorisms, but the writer, named Trudi, had him on hold for

more than a week and got an amusing, though possibly inaccurate story out of him. Since entertainment scores higher than accuracy, however, there was no permanent harm from that; there seldom has been in the writing of history. Which actually is one of old Altair's own aphorisms.

The reason Trudi made the effort to find Altair to and speak to him is that she had learned somewhere that he was the only man still alive who had actually known Dom Felix. How he had survived so very long had a great deal to do with Dom Felix; he, Altair, was a Double Tripper. Double Tripping was a privilege accorded long-term Terran settlers or their immediate children, should they wish to cease their subjective lives at a certain point and resume them a century or so later. This was done, if there was available space, by Tripping back to Terra in biostasis, but instead of being defrosted there, being stored until the next ships departed, and returning to Medea. Which Altair did, and lived a long life afterward.

Why? It had a lot to do with Dom Felix. There are other reasons, of course, but even those lead to Dom Felix. "Funny little fellow," he told Trudi. "Crazy, of course. Not crazy, maybe—obsessed. Nothing wrong with that. All the movers and shakers of history have been obsessives. Reasonable people who can see both sides of questions cancel themselves out. One thing he did for me—he straightened me out. I'd been soaking myself for so long in the past that I had forgotten that the present is history too, and it pays to keep your eye on it. Now I'm a Double Tripper with a lot of years to boot and the present I had is now everybody's history, even mine. Heh!"

"About Dom Felix—" Trudi nudged gently.

"Well, you see, he's why I Double-Tripped. I mean, I had to know—you see that, don't you? How could a historian not know a thing like that?"

"A thing like what?"

"What happened to him! I mean, a man comes to the planet, solves an insoluble social problem, solves an insoluble technical problem, changes the history of the whole human species and probably a lot of others along with it, then goes back to Terra and what? And what? Never another word about him, anywhere. A historian can't hold still for that!"

"All right," said Trudi to get this out of the way, to get on with

her main thrust. "All right then, what did happen to him?"

"According to the transcript I had tucked into my freeze-bottle when I went back, very little. I mean, a lot, but very little that explains anything. He joined the Brothers of Shame."

"What is 'shame'?" Trudi wondered.

"It's like guilt. He took an oath of silence and never wrote or said another word. The Brothers devote themselves to meditating on their sinfulness. Spend their lives at it and die inside the walls without even a death record. That's what he did and I'll never know why."

"Ah," said Trudi, unable to think of anything else. Then: "You were going to tell me how he invented the Receiver."

"Yeh. Yeh. He came back from Arca, I was down at the cycle pool when he came in, he said we could have instant transmission, faster than light, he said it could be done. But not that way, he said, never that way. I didn't know what he was talking about."

"Wait a bit. What or where is Arca?"

"Oh, it's long gone. Settlement or something, Medean natives, intelligent species, long gone too, far as I know. Or maybe went underground. That's Medea for you, full of ecological pockets, mutative radiation, fast evolution; species come, species go. They say there is a whole race of intelligent balloons over on Castorview. An old theory, but now it's 'sposed to be proved. They—"

"Please—about Dom Felix."

"Yeh. Yeh. After he came back the natives abandoned Arca. Must've, no bodies around. They must've pulled the plug on their wing-house plant, so Arca just naturally blew away. The wing-houses were—"

"Did Dom Felix—"

"I'm coming to that," said the old man testily. "The Big Chief was ready to give Dom Felix anything he wanted including his own job. Dom Felix, he brought the Acceptance idea and before you know it, an enclave ready to massacre itself turned into one big happy family. You see, Dom Felix—"

"I know about that part, Altair. Tell me about the Receiver."

"Receiver, yeh. There was this technician genius, Kert Row was his name, and Wallich, a Mule, a theoretical synthesist, best I ever saw. She was also, well, I had a real big thing for her for a

while, well, she had a lot to do with me Double Tripping a whole lot later, after what happened.”

Patiently, “What happened?”

“Dom Felix got a little winghouse out in the compound and drafted Kert Row and Wallich to help him invent the Receiver. Mind you, he had no head for what it would take, but he had the drive for it and the sure certain knowledge it can be done, and between them Kert Row and Wallich had what knowledge and technique he didn’t. How hard he drove them, and himself too, you wouldn’t believe. And Wallich pregnant at the time, too. He had some crazy idea it could be done some other way, some way that would tear Terra apart; he was afraid of that. More than afraid. Terrified. Anyway, bioenergetics was the key to it, and Wallich was one of the all-time greats at that. It was Wallich developed the defrosting technique with orgasm, the full organic bioenergetic field being better than anything ever invented to kick a Tripper out of stasis. That’s how she came to be pregnant by Dom Felix. It couldn’t have happened by anyone on Medea because she was a Mule, if you know what that is.”

“I know what that is. Dom Felix—”

“Dom Felix was from Terra and she had his charts down to the last molecule. He was a good genetic match and she knew a lot of tricks to make it perfect. She treated his sperm-sample to make absolutely sure.”

“Why did she do that?”

“Ah, Wally, she had a kink, a little neurotic kink, know what I mean? A Mule, you know; I remember she said to me once, ‘Altair, oh God, what I wouldn’t give to be a real woman.’ I said, ‘Well, you are, altogether through and through,’ and she cried and said she wasn’t. Well, she was; Trudi, she had hair like—”

“Yes, yes. Still makes you cry, doesn’t it? Ha ha! So she thought if she had a baby she would be more real than real. Now go on about the Receiver.”

“Okay, okay. The three of them threw out the electromagnetic spectrum, and the Einsteinian field complex, space, time, gravity, matter, and started outside all that, with bioenergetics as the beachhead. Well, it turned out not to be bioenergetics in the end, but an analog of it, something brand-new. The vibratory—”

“Yes, I know how it works, everybody knows how it works. I want to know how it was invented. So—it was the three of them

who pulled it off?”

“Well no, not exactly; it was Dom Felix. Kert Row got killed. He was coming out to Dom Felix’s winghouse with something Dom Felix had sent him for when an underpillar from the house fell on him. Squashed his head. There was a mechanic for the cycle pool started an ugly rumor about that, said the sensor-chips inside the house had been tampered with, made the house lift and topple the pillar. Said he saw Dom Felix out there beating on Kert Row’s head. Don’t you believe it. I was out there myself not ten minutes after and saw Dom Felix working like a demon to get the pillar off him, not that it would have done any good, his head was split wide open. Dom Felix was crying, saying over and over, ‘A way of thinking, that’s all it is, that special way of thinking.’ I knew he was going to miss that special way of thinking and I bet he did, but he got through anyway. Maybe it could only have been done by a crazy man and I told you, he really was kind of crazy.

“Like about the baby. Once Wally was about to term he got the idea to deliver it himself. He was still the Big Chief’s superhero, mind, so he could get what he wanted. Wally, I think she loved him—then, not later, oh God no—but she was willing to do anything he wanted. So he did, all by himself, and it was okay. And then he called the medics and they took her and the baby inside. And from that day on he never looked at either one of them and she wouldn’t even mention his name or let anyone else. All she told me was he did something so disgusting that it made her sick to think about it, and it should be forgotten before the kid grew up. And anyway the kid died and after that she did too, and that’s all I know.”

“That’s all you know about the Receiver?”

“That’s all I know about Wally. The Receiver, well, you’d think without Kert Row and Wallich, Dom Felix would’ve ground to a halt. Far from it. Nothing could’ve stopped a drive like he had; and then, though he had no real training, maybe something of Kert Row’s design genius and Wally’s talent for synthesizing theories had rubbed off on him some way. Anyway, he did it by himself alright, and now you’re talking to me, and all the settlements on all the planets are tied together again.... Funny thing, he started out by failing. Maybe that’s what lit his spark.”

“Failing? At what?”

“If you remember, I told you about Arca, the Medean town or

shrine or whatever it was. Dom Felix went out there to bring them Acceptance and begin a new era on Medea, love and brotherhood between two different species for the very first time. And that one time he sure laid a big egg. One visit from him and they cut out and we never saw them again.”

“I never knew Acceptance to fail.”

The old man laughed. “Maybe they just wouldn’t accept him. I told you he was more than a little crazy.”

“One more thing, Altair. Will you give me your impression of the Receiver, how you feel about it and what it has done?”

“I think it’s wonderful and marvelous and a miracle and all the other stuff they say about it, and it certainly has tightened up communications, and anything that does that for humanity is something humanity needs, across space or across a room or across a bed. We are very good at talk and very bad at real communication. Everything we have ever accomplished we have done at the price of something important; it’s as if we weren’t capable of seeing all the factors of any problem. Someone brought rabbits to Australia for pets and the rabbits damn near ate up the continent. Someone found out petroleum could make a fuel and they used it for fuel until, one way or another, it killed more people than any war ever has. Someone found a hormone that would prevent miscarriages and produced a whole generation of women—their daughters—with a new kind of cancer. Someone found out how to keep premature babies alive and produce a couple hundred thousand blind people. We were always like that. I guess we always will be like that.”

“How do you apply that to the Receiver? Or do you?”

“Sure I do, but it’s a feeling, that’s all; not enough time has gone by to be sure. But you can see the signs. It’s changed from a great discovery, a miracle, into a toy, the same way all inventions do when they turn into entertainments. I just have this feeling about it.... Don’t know what makes me think about it right now, but when Dom Felix came back from Arca that time, he asked me, ‘Why don’t dolphins bite?’ Well, that was a line I used to spout back in those days; dolphins are carnivores with plenty of sharp teeth, plenty of strength and speed, they can even take on a shark and drive it off; and men have captured them and humiliated them and tortured them and brainwashed them and never once has a dolphin attacked or bitten a man; they even have been

known to help a man to shore. And I used to say, it's because they know something we don't, and they're sorry for us."

"I still don't understand how that applies to the Receiver."

"Neither do I, friend, not altogether. I told you, it's just a feeling I have—that by using little parts of whole things, we pass miracles that are a lot smaller than they could have been in their own time, in their own way. I see the Receiver turning into a toy, and it makes me sad.

"It takes a minimum of redesign to turn a crucifix into a pogo stick."

Vengeance Is.

“You have a dark beer?”

“In a place like this you want a dark beer?”

“Whatever, then.”

The bartender drew a thick-walled Stein and slid it across. “I worked in the city. I know about dark beer and Guinness and like that. These yokels around here,” he added, his tone of voice finishing the sentence.

The customer was a small man with glasses and not much of a beard. He had a gentle voice. “A man called Grinny ...”

“Grimme,” the barman corrected. “So you’ve heard. Him and his brother.”

The customer didn’t say anything. The bartender wiped. The customer told him to pour one for himself.

“I don’t usual.” But the barman poured. “Grimme and that brother Dave, the worst.” He drank. “I hate it a lot out here, yokels like that is why.”

“There’s still the city.”

“Not for me. The wife.”

“Oh.” And he waited.

“They lied a lot. Come in here, get drunk, tell about what they done, mostly women. Bad, what they said they done. Worse when it wasn’t lies. You want another?”

“Not yet.”

“No lie about the Fannen kid, Marcy. Fourteen, fifteen maybe. Taken her out behind the Johnson’s silo, what they done to her. And then they said they kill her, she said anything. She didn’t. Not about that, not about anything, ever again, two years. Until the fever last November, she told her mom. She died. Mom came told me ’fore she moved out.”

The customer waited.

“Hear them tell it, they were into every woman, wife, daughter in the valley, anytime they wanted.”

The customer blew through his nostrils, once, gently. A man came in for two six-packs and a hip-sized Southern Comfort and

went away in a pickup truck. “ ‘Monday busy’ I call this,” said the bartender, looking around the empty room. “And here it’s Wednesday.” Without being asked, he drew another beer for the customer. “To have somebody to talk to,” he said an explanation. Then he said nothing at all for a long time.

The customer took some beer. “They just went after local folks, then.”

“Grimme and David? Well yes, they had the run of it, the most of the men off with the lumbering, nothing grows in these rocks around here. Except maybe chickens, and who cares for chickens? Old folks, and the women. Anyway, that Grimme, shoulders *this* wide. Eyes *that* close together, and hairy. The brother, maybe you’d say a good-looking guy for a yokel, but, well, scary.” He nodded at his choice of words and said it again. “Scary.”

“Crazy eyes,” said the customer.

“You got it. So the times they wasn’t just lyin’, the women didn’t want to tell and I got to say it, the men just as soon not know.”

“But they never bothered anyone except their own valley people.”

“Who else is ever around here to bother? Oh, they bragged about this one and that one they got to on the road, you know, blonde in a convertible, give them the eye, give them whiskey, give them a good time up the back roads. All lies and you know it. They got this big old van. Gal hitchhiker, they say the first woman ever used ’em both up. Braggin’, lyin’. Shagged a couple city people in a little hatchback, leaned on them ’til the husband begged ’em to ball the wife. I don’t believe that at all.”

“You don’t.”

“What man would say that to a couple hairy yokels, no matter what? Man got to be yellow or downright kinky.”

“What happened?”

“Nothing happened, I told you I don’t believe it! It’s lies, brags and lies. Said they found ’em driving the quarry road, ’way yonder. Passed ’em and parked the van to let ’em by, look ’em over. Passed ’em and got ahead, when they caught up David was lying on the road and Grimme made like artificial you know, lifeguards do it.”

“Respiration.”

“Yeah, that. They seen that and they stopped, the couple in the

hatchback, got out, Grimme and David jumped 'em. Said the man's a shrimpy little guy look like a professor, woman's a dish, too good for him. But that's what they said. I don't believe any of it."

"You mean they'd never do a thing like that."

"Oh they would all right. Cutting off the woman's clo'es to see what she got with a big old skinning knife. Took a while, said it was a lot of laughs. David holdin' both her arms behind her back one-handed, cuttin' away her clo'es and makin' jokes, Grimme holdin' the little perfessor man around the neck with one elbow, laughin', 'til the man snatched his head clear and that's when he said it. 'Give it to him,' he told the woman, 'Go on, give it to him,' and she says, 'For the love of God, don't ask me to do that.' I don't believe any man would say a thing like that."

"You really don't."

"No way. Because listen, when the man jerked out his head and said that, and the woman said don't ask her to do that, *then* the perfessor guy tried to fight Grimme. You see what I'm saying? If Grimme breaks him up and stomps on the pieces, then you could maybe understand him beggin' the woman to quit and give in. The way Grimme told it right here standing where you are, the man said it when Grimme hadn't done nothing yet but hold his neck. That's the part Grimme told over and over, laughin'. 'Give it to him,' the man kept telling her. And Grimme never even hit him yet. 'Course when the little man tried to fight him Grimme just laughed and clobbered him once side of the neck, laid him cold. That was when the woman turned into a wildcat, to hear them tell it. It was all David could do to hold her, let alone mess around. Grimme left him to it and went around back to see what they got in their car. Mind you, I don't know if he really done all this; I'm just telling you what he said. I heard it three, four times just that first week."

"So he open up the back and there was a stack of pictures, you know painting like on canvas. He hauled 'em all out and put them all down flat on the ground and walked up and back looking at them. He says, 'David, you like these?' and David he said, 'Hell no,' and Grimme walked the whole line, one big boot in the middle of each and every picture. And he says at the first step that woman screamed like it was her face he was stepping on and she hollered, 'Don't, don't, they mean everything in the world to

him!' she meant the professor, but Grimme went ahead anyway. And then she just quit, she said go ahead, and Dave took her into the van and Grimme sat on the professor till he was done, then Grimme went in and got his while Dave sat on the man, after that they got into their van and come here to get drunk and tell about it. And if you really want to know why I don't believe any of it, those people never tried to call the law." And the barman gave a vehement nod and drank deep.

"So what happened to them?"

"Who—the city people? I told you—I don't even believe there was any."

"Grimme."

"Oh. Them." The barman gave a strange chuckle and said with sudden piety, "The Lord has strange ways of fighting evil."

The customer waited. The barman drew them another beer and poured a jigger for himself.

"Next time I see Grimme it's a week, ten days after. It's like tonight, nobody here. He comes in for a fifth of sourmash. He's walking funny, kind of bowlegged. I thought at first trying to clown, he'd do that. But every step he kind of grunted, like you would if I stuck a knife in you, but every step. And the look on his face I never saw the like before. I tell you, it scared me. I went for the whiskey and outside there was screaming."

As he talked his gaze went to the floor and wall and somehow through it, his eyes were round and bulging. "I said 'What in God's name is that?' and Grimme said, 'It's David, he's out in the van, he's hurtin'. And I said 'Better get him to the doctor,' and he said they just came from there, full of painkiller but it wasn't enough, and he took in his whiskey and left, walking that way and grunting every step, and drove off. Last time I saw him."

His eyes withdrew from elsewhere, back into the room, and became more normal. "He never paid for the whiskey. I don't think he meant to stiff me, the one thing he never did. He just didn't think of it at the time. Couldn't," he added.

"What was wrong with him?"

"I don't know. The doc didn't know."

"That would be Dr. McCabe?"

"McCabe? I don't know any Dr. McCabe around here. It was Doctor Thetford over the Allersville Corners."

"Ah. And how are they now, Grimme and David?"

“Dead is how they are.”

“Dead?... You didn’t say that.”

“I didn’t?”

“Not until now.” The customer got off his stool and put money on the bar and picked up his car keys. He said, his voice quite as gentle as it had been all along, “Man wasn’t yellow and he wasn’t kinky. It was something far worse.” Not caring at all what this might mean to the bartender, he walked out and got into his car.

He drove until he found a telephone booth—the vanishing kind with a door that would shut. First he called Information and got a number; then he dialed it.

“Dr. Thetford? Hello ... I want to ease your mind about something. You recently had two fatalities, brothers.... No, I will not tell you my name. Bear with me, please. You attended these two and you probably performed the autopsy, right? Good. I hoped you had. And you couldn’t diagnose, correct? You probably certified peritonitis, with good reason.... No, I will *not* tell you my name! And I am not calling to question your competence. Far from it. My purpose is only to ease your mind, which presupposes that you are good at your job and you really care about a medical anomaly. Do we understand each other? Not yet? Then hear me out.... Good.”

Rather less urgently, he went on: “An analogy is a disease called granuloma inguinale, which, I don’t have to tell you, can destroy the whole sexual apparatus with ulcerations and necrosis, and penetrate the body to and all through the peritoneum.... Yes, I know you considered that and I know you rejected it, and I know why.... Right. Just too damn fast. I’m sure you looked for characteristic bacterial and viral evidence as well, and didn’t find any.

“... Yes, of course, Doctor—you’re right and I’m sorry, going on about all the things it isn’t without saying what it is.

“Actually, it’s a hormone poison, resulting from a biochemical mutation in—in the carrier. It’s synergistic, wildly accelerating—as you saw. One effect is something you couldn’t possibly know—it affects the tactile neurons in such a way that morphine and its derivatives have an inverted effect—in much the same way that amphetamines have a calmativ effect on children. In other words, the morphine aggravated and intensified their pain.... I know, I know; I’m sorry. I made a real effort to get to you and tell

you this in time to spare them some of that agony, but—as you say it’s just too damn fast.

“... Vectors? Ah. That’s something you do not have to worry about. I mean it, doctor—it is totally unlikely you will ever see another case.

“... Where did it come from? I can tell you that. The two brothers assaulted and raped a woman—very probably the only woman on earth to have this mutated hormone poison.... Yes, I *can* be sure. I have spent most of the last six years researching this thing. There have been only two other cases of it—yes, just as fast, just as lethal. Both occurred before she was aware of it. She—she is a woman of great sensitivity and a profound sense of responsibility. One was a man she cared very little about, hardly knew. The other was someone she cared very much indeed about. The cost to her when she discovered what had happened was—well, you can imagine.

“She is a gentle and compassionate person with a profound sense of ethical responsibility. Please believe me when I tell you that at the time of the assault she would have done anything in their power to protect those—those men from the effects of that ... contact. When her husband—yes, she has a husband, I’ll come to that—when he became infuriated at the indignities they were putting on her, and begged her to give in and let them get what they deserved, she was horrified—actually hated him for a while for having given in to such a murderous suggestion. It was only when they vandalized some things that were especially precious to her husband—priceless—that she too experienced the same deadly fury and let them go ahead. The reaction has been terrible for her—first to see her husband seeking vengeance, when she was convinced he could rise above that—and in a moment find that she herself could be swept away by that same thing.... But I’m sorry, Dr. Thetford—I’ve come far afield from medical concerns. I meant only to reassure you that you are not looking at some mysterious new plague. You can be sure that every possible precaution is being taken against its recurrence.... I admit that total precautions against the likes of those two may not be possible, but there is little chance of it happening again. And that sir, is all I’m going to say, so good—

“What? Unfair?... I suppose you’re right at that—to tell you so much and so little all at once. And I do owe it to you to explain

what my concern is in all this. Please—give me a moment to get my thoughts together.

“... Very well. I was commissioned by that lady to make some discreet inquiries about what happened to those two, and if possible to get to their doctor in time to inform him—you—about the inverted effect of morphine. There would be no way to save their lives, but they might have been spared the agony. Further, she found that not knowing for sure if they were indeed victims was unbearable. This news is going to be hard for her to take, but she will survive that somehow; she’s done it before. Hardest of all for her—and her husband—will be to come to terms with the fact that, under pressure, they both found themselves capable of murderous vengefulness. She always believed, and by her example he came to believe, that vengeance is unthinkable. And he failed her. And she failed herself.” Without a trace of humor, he laughed. “‘Vengeance is mine, sayeth the Lord.’ I can’t interpret that, doctor, or vouch for it. All I can derive from this—episode—is that vengeance is. And that’s all I intend to say to you—what?

“... One more question ... Ah—the husband. Yes, you have the right to ask about that. I’ll say it this way: There was a wedding seven years ago. It was three years before there was a marriage, you follow? Three years of the most intensive research and the most meticulous experimentation. And you can accept as fact that she is the only woman in the world who can cause this affliction—and he is the only man who is immune.

“Dr. Thetford, goodnight.”

He hung up and stood for a long while with his forehead against the cool glass of the booth. At length, he shuddered, pulled himself together, went out and drove away in his little hatchback.

Seasoning

Don't churn a bunch of seasonings and flavorings into your hamburgers. Just knead the meat well and form them on the cutting board. As they firm up you can get the knack of throwing them down flat with a gratifying *slap*. Make them just a little wider than your onion rolls. Now they won't fall apart when you turn them under the broiler. The results are astonishing. But that's not the best part.

I don't belong here.

"Free will and predestination are the same thing," said Alice. She was tall and had long brown hair and a high-domed forehead and blazing blue eyes, fire and ice. "By the time you leave here you'll understand that." She was a seminar leader. I never thought I'd go to one of those things but I did.

On each raw hamburger put four dots of Tabasco, a puddle of ketchup the size of a quarter, another one like it of steak sauce or barbecue sauce, and very lightly dust them with powdered garlic. Now stack them, one on top of the other, rotating each one enough to spread the seasonings. Take the top one and put it on the bottom. This will leave a mess on your cutting board. That's okay. Turn the broiler on. And I still haven't gotten to the best part.

Alice put us through a whole series of processes and exercises. I won't describe them because you might want to go someday and a lot of them are effective only because you don't know until later what they're for. "I can't give you insights," Alice said, "You'll have to do that by yourself." But I will tell you about one of them. She gave us a set of cards with questions written on each, and one of mine said "Write what is true about yourself." And I wrote: "I don't belong here."

Set out your hamburgers on a broiling grille—the kind with ridges. That’s important. Slice some onions (the red ones are best; the flat ones are mildest) and some tomatoes, very thin. A sharp serrated knife is best. Get two soup bowls exactly the same size and put the onions and tomatoes into one of them. Cover the surface with Worcestershire sauce and again with soy sauce. Slide the pan with the hamburgers under the broiler. The best part is coming up.

Four days after the seminar I went to see Alice. She did personal counseling as well as seminars, so I knew her address. I could’ve phoned first but I didn’t. I knocked and she called “Who is it?” And I said “Me—from the seminar.” She opened the door. She was wearing a blue robe with a red sash. She said, “Come in.” I looked at her for a long time—seconds, I suppose, but much longer I think that I’ve ever looked at anyone without saying anything. She looked into my eyes without blinking and without shifting her gaze. Finally I said, “I’d like to make love to you.” She said, “Now?”

Split your onion rolls. English muffins are all right, but too small. Onion rolls are best. Now is the time to slice your cheese. Your choice: I like extra sharp Cheddar. Now take the empty soup bowl and set it upside down, lip-to-lip, over the one with the tomatoes and onions in it, and turn them over. (Better do this over the sink.) Now all the soy and Worcestershire sauces which have drained through will drain right back again. Pull out the broiling pan and turn the hamburgers. You’re very near to learning the best part.

She pulled on the red sash and it fell away. She shrugged out of the robe and took my hand. She was very beautiful, lean and firm. She had a large warm waterbed. She was wonderful. Afterward I wanted to know if it was always that quick and easy with her, with, well, anybody, but I didn’t dare. She sat in the middle of the bed in a lotus position and smiled, and answered anyway. “You have something much more important than sex on your mind, but it was in the way. Now we can get to it. It’s what you wrote on that last card, isn’t it?”

If you have an oven over the broiler, put the onion rolls in for not more than two minutes. Take them out and spread each half with mayonnaise, very thin—so thin that people who don't like mayonnaise won't know it's there. Now turn the broiler off, pull out the pan, lay on the cheese and slide the pan back in. The broiler will be quite hot enough to melt the cheese. Put a lettuce leaf on each half roll and then the onions and tomatoes. Peek into the broiler and if the cheese is melted, lift out the hamburgers with a spatula and assemble them onto the rolls. Aside from eating them, the best part is next.

"I wrote, 'I don't belong here,' " I said.

"I know," she said. She really did; she remembered, and she sees scores of people, hundreds of cards. I said, "It ... sort of went off like a flashbulb in the face." She didn't say anything, just watched me with that steady bright gaze. I said, "I didn't mean I didn't belong in the seminar, or in the city, I mean *here*, here in this world, in this life." She was great at just waiting, just saying nothing. So I had to say more. "It hit me so hard that I knew it was true. Know that it is true. But ..." She still waited; she wasn't going to help, not at this point. "But if I don't belong here, never have, never since I was born—where do I belong?"

Now comes the best part. After you've eaten, the broiling pan is still warm. Get a Pyrex dish—a large custard cup is just right—and a wire tea-strainer, and you pour off the fat that has sweated out of the hamburgers. You do the same thing when you broil *anything* except fish: pork, beef, lamb, venison—anything; also when you fry something in butter. That fat carries with it the flavor of all those meats and all those seasonings. Every once in awhile you warm the custard cup—the place on the top of the stove where the pilot light hides, if you have that kind of stove, is just right. All those different fats will blend, and down at the bottom (this is why you use glass), you'll find a dark brown layer. This is water-based—all the fat has floated away from it. Put the cup in the fridge for an hour or so, and you have absolutely magic frying fat. Put a lot in a pan and when it melts, spoon it over eggs until they're "blinded"—a thin film over the yolks while the whites are firm. As for the dark layer—pop the whole

lump out of the cup and you can scrape that dark stuff off with a table knife and drop it into gravy, soup, or stew. That cup of fat is the best part.

Alice said, "Aside from that—what do you remember most about the seminar?"

I looked down at my hands, turned them over. They seemed very real. "The little man." She waited. "The little man inside, that no matter how mad you get, how you scream or fight or—or—" I made a gesture at her, sitting in the middle of the bed "—or how high you fly with someone, that little man is back there watching you. I never met anyone yet who hasn't had that feeling from time to time."

Alice said, "And who is that little man?" I remembered. "You said that it wasn't a little man at all. You said it was a—a thing—an entity. An intelligent entity ... checking up on his script."

"*Your* script," she said.

"Okay, okay, my script." I had to stop for a while then, to think back, replay. It was hard, but I felt very close to something.

The richest, tastiest chowder you ever flang a fang into, fast and easy: get a can of condensed New England chowder, and instead of milk, rinse out the can with two-thirds heavy cream or half-and-half, and one third sherry. Add a tin of smoked baby clams. Heat gently, and serve with a very light sprinkle of cayenne. Don't expect anyone to eat a heavy entrée after this.

"You said to imagine a great big sphere, and inside is all of time and space. All of it. And outside are these intelligent entities, and all they are is curious; all they want to do is experience."

"Go on," Alice said. Her eyes are so bright....

"One might say: 'I want the experience of being a seventeen-year-old girl in the fourteenth century who was burned at the stake.' Or 'I'd like the experience of being a four-month aborted fetus in 1994.' And they just dive in and do it." I looked at Alice. She was waiting for something. I thought about what I just said, and then I remembered: "They have to create what happens. Write a script." She still waited, so I said, "Not only the experience itself; the house, the city, the country, the whole

world where it happens. All of it.”

“Which makes that entity responsible for all of it,” she reminded me.

“So that’s who the ‘little man watching’ really is—that, that *thing*—”

“Not a thing,” she said, interrupting for the very first time. “It’s *you*. You’re living a script that you wrote. Which is why free will and predestination are the same thing.”

It’s nice when food looks beautiful and it isn’t hard to do. Make nests of rice or mashed potatoes—some East Indian restaurants serve the rice out of ring molds, so you can put the curry in the center and the condiments all around the edges. When you mash potatoes, steal the packet of cheese sauce out of that cheap macaroni-and-cheese dinner and throw it in, with some butter and maybe a flat tablespoon of mayonnaise, not enough to identify. It comes out a beautiful pale orange. Make a nest and put in your stew or goulash or whatever, inside the nest. If you really want to make a guest gasp and drool, trim a piece of heavy cardboard exactly to the diameter of your dinner plates so that it makes a fence. Make a spaghetti sauce with clams instead of meat and a white clam sauce from an undiluted can of chowder with some minced clams added, plus their juice. Put linguine—that’s flat spaghetti—on one side of the fence and spinach noodles on the other side, and white sauce on the green pasta and red sauce on the white pasta and remove the fence.

“But why write such rotten scripts? If what you say is so, everybody’s where they want to be, even beggars with sores on their shins and starving children and guys being tortured in jails?” She nodded, watching me. I said, “I can’t accept that.”

She waited a bit and then almost smiled. “Unacceptable?” She asked softly.

And that rang a bell. “Unacceptable ... ‘to accept the unacceptable.’ You said that, in the seminar. But I can’t remember why you said it.”

“Yes you can,” she said, and waited. I drew a total blank this time, and I guess she knew it, because she gave me a nudge: “You say you don’t belong here. Is ‘here’—unacceptable?”

“Yes,” I said without hesitation. “Then,” she asked, “why did you write this script?” “You mean—the me out there?” She nodded. I thought about that, and then mumbled, “I put it down to—curiosity? That’s all. I mean, throwing yourself into imperfect places, into pain and disappointment and well, the unacceptable—it just doesn’t make sense.”

“It doesn’t?”

“It sure doesn’t ... unless ...” I felt my eyes get big. “Unless those, uh, entities want to do what you said—to learn to accept the unacceptable. Even if they have to create it. That doesn’t make sense.”

“It doesn’t? Suppose they can’t go on unless they learn that.”

“Go on? Go on where?” She shrugs. “Everything living has to go on. Seed to shrub, shrub to tree, egg to bird.”

“You mean—evolve. They have to learn to accept the unacceptable in order to evolve into—whatever’s next for them.” Surprisingly, she laughed. She said, “You keep on saying ‘they.’ ”

Something in my stomach made me notice the clock on the headboard. “My God ... have you eaten yet?”

“It’s all right,” she said.

“It isn’t all right. Hey, let me cook something.”

“I don’t know if there is anyth—”

I hopped off the waterbed, making waves. “I’ll find something. Where is the kitchen?” She pointed. Naked, I went into the kitchen.

She was right. A dozen eggs, some butter. Whole grain bread. In the freezer, broccoli, green beans—ah. Onion rings. I turned on the oven—all the way.

Alice came out to watch.

I set out four cups and a big bowl. On the third try I found the drawer with the eggbeater in it. I carefully separated the eggs, putting the whites in the bowl and one yolk each in the four cups. For this one you don’t want the yolks to break. I put a pinch of salt in the bowl. Alice leaned back against the refrigerator. “Why is ‘here’ unacceptable?” Lord, she’s beautiful.

I punched down the control on the electric toaster, and turn the knob over to ‘light.’ These things always work better if you cycle them once. I took up the eggbeater and began to crank like hell. When I began to feel it in my shoulder I stopped and asked her if she had any hot chocolate, cocoa. She waved a hand at a cabinet.

I'd seen the bunch of dried jalapeno peppers by then, you see. I found two big mugs and used one of them to measure out two cupfuls of milk into a saucepan and put it on low. The chocolate was instant. Well, you use what you have. I dumped a packet into each mug. "Why is 'here' unacceptable?" She asked again.

I lifted the eggbeater to see if the beaten whites came to sharp points yet. They didn't. She came close and touched my arm. You can build up static electricity with shoes on a dry carpet; can you do it barefoot on asphalt tile? She said, "You don't answer. Is it because you don't know, or because you do know?"

"Oh, I know. I just don't have the words for it yet." I started to crank and she went back to the refrigerator. I stopped to put the first two slices of bread in the toaster and turned down the heat under the milk. You don't want to boil milk. I beat the egg whites some more until they peaked sharp and firm like stalagmites. I said, "There's something so wrong about this whole world, about, well, life.... You really want to hear this?"

"Yes."

The toaster popped. I took out the toast, barely golden, put in the rest of the bread, buttered the hot slices. "Where'd you get all this, about scripts and everything?"

"I read a book," she said. "2150 A.D., by Alexander. I began to teach it. The more I taught it, the more I learned. That's what teaching is all about."

The rest of the toast popped up. Laying on butter, I said, "I saw a film. Underwater. Eight or nine crabs fighting over a dead fish. All kicking and clawing and biting each other, stealing and shoving ... it's all like that."

"What's all like that?"

I said impatiently, "Everything. Everything in the world. Life." I found a cookie sheet and put out the four pieces of toast. I began spooning the stiff egg whites onto them. There was a lot of egg white; it mounded up high. With a spoon I made a crater in the middle of each one. I slit open the end of the box of frozen onion rings with my thumbnail and took out four of them, and placed one of them into each crater. "There's something terribly wrong about that," I said. "All the life there is feeds on the dead bodies of other life. I can't believe any kind of life wants it that way; all life wants to do is to live." I opened the oven and checked it: hot. I shut the door and took out one of the cups with the yolk in it,

and carefully dropped the yolk into the center of the onion ring. "And you know what comes out of that?" I went on. "From the tiniest plankton right on up the food chain, it's fighting and killing, to feed and stay alive to fight and kill some more." I finished dropping in the yolks and put the cookie sheet into the oven. I spun around and looked her right in the eyes. "And that's just plain wrong."

She didn't blink. But her lips twitched a little and she said softly, "Unacceptable?"

"You're damn right, unacceptable!" I got to the milk about four seconds before bubbles started to lace the sides of the saucepan, and poured it into the mugs. I took down a dried jalapeno and cut it into two lengthwise and used the pieces, one in each hand, to stir the hot chocolate. "You know whose recipe this is, for the chocolate? Elizabeth the First, back in the 16th century ... Unacceptable, yes. 'Way out in the back country when I was a kid I saw them butcher a pig. They hung it up by the hind legs and cut its throat; it bled and screamed for twenty minutes. It's easy to call that unacceptable; you can see it and hear it. Things are better now," I said bitterly, "because it's done where we don't see or hear it anymore. One of those hunters who clubbed baby harp seals said something really important to a reporter; he said, 'If these things looked like lobsters you guys wouldn't be here.' "

"My goodness," said Alice. I could tell she didn't say that about pigs or lobsters; she said it about how excited I was. I peeked into the oven. Not yet. I went on: "And it isn't only animal life. Who's to say a carrot doesn't scream in some different wavelength when it's pulled up? Here's a happy cow, murdering grass blades by the thousands, and shuffling its big hard feet through the bleeding bodies before they're dead; talk about Auschwitz!" More quietly I said, "All life wants to do is live, but under it all is the pressure to do it by killing. Is it any wonder we're at the very edge of blowing up the earth? On the surface we can cry a lot and chant 'Give peace a chance,' but deep down underneath is a joy in killing because there's no other way to live here." I turned off the oven. Alice took down two plates and put them on the work surface next to the stove. With a spatula I took the things out of the oven and dished them up.

"They're called butterfly eggs," I said. "I don't know why."

Alice gasped. They were beautiful—quite large but light as cloud, with the little horns of the egg white not quite brown and shading through gold to snow. The yolks were still liquid, held in the seasoned circle of onion. She took the plates to the table in the nook at the end of the kitchen and I brought the mugs. We sat down and Alice tasted the cocoa. “Oh my goodness,” she said again, and it was as fine a compliment as I have ever heard. Then she set down the mug and began to laugh, chimes and cadenzas of rich wonderful laughter, until she ran out of breath, while I sat there dumbfounded. While she blotted her eyes with a paper napkin I said, a little stiffly, “What was that about?”

“Later,” she said, and went to work on the butterfly egg. “Oh ...” she said, and again it was a profound, an elaborate, even an awed communication. So we sat quietly and ate in appreciative silence. It was good, I’ll say that. Perfect.

I looked up from my empty plate and fell into that steady blue gaze. “You’re quite right,” she said soberly. “You don’t belong here.” She gave me time to let that soak in and then said, “Neither do I. Neither does anyone.” She took up the empty dishes and mugs, and carried them to the sink. I love to watch her, her hands, the way she moves. She came back and sat opposite. I enjoyed the epaulettes of light on her smooth shoulders, from the window behind her. She said, “It isn’t curiosity, or thirst for experience, or some sort of endurance test that makes us write the scripts we do. What we do is to ponder the possibility of a fulfillment, an ethos—a *good*, if you like—so high and so strong that nothing can destroy it, or even tarnish it. If we think we have it, we create a situation, a world—a universe if we have to—in which all reason says that high ideal just cannot exist; we write that script, and we experience it; and if we find that the good still shines through, we know we’ve found it.”

“I thought creating universes was God’s job,” I said, jokingly.

“It is,” she said, not joking at all. She let that sink in for a while and then said, “This isn’t the only philosophy that winds up saying ‘thou art God.’ ”

“Even me?” I said, in such a genuine astonishment that I made her laugh.

“Seems to me,” I said, “if we’re all writing our very own scripts, there may not be enough room for them all in the universe.”

“There is,” she smiled, “in infinity.” I think that was the

moment when I understood that Alice really believes, really lives in the place she teaches about. “Go where you don’t belong. Accept what you find. Want what you have, not what you don’t have.”

“What happens after you’ve played out your script?”

“You go back and write another one, with something else that’s unacceptable.”

“And ultimately you get to where there is nothing in all infinity that you can’t accept?”

“I don’t know that. I haven’t been there yet,” said Alice. Then she said, “You really love to cook.”

“Yes ...”

“Eggs and toast, that would be enough to feed on. The hose in the gas tank. Fuel. What makes you do butterfly eggs?”

“I dunno. I just like to.”

“You just like to. You create a hell of a world, where the absolute necessity for existence is a chain of murder. You do it because it’s the most unacceptable thing you can possibly think of. But to do that you have to create a planet in a universe in which such a thing can happen. You have to take the responsibility then, disease and war and cruelty and injustice. But don’t beat yourself up with that. To make everything fit you had to create Bach and sunsets and ecstasy and love and butterfly eggs too. Acceptance is more than to sit smiling under a bodhi tree while everything goes to hell. It’s taking the thing you can’t tolerate and making something beautiful out of it—and then sharing it.” She reached across and took my hand. “That’s why I laughed so hard when I looked at the butterfly eggs. Here you were so frowning and puzzled and feeling lost while you took the unacceptable and made beauty out of it, and shared it.”

Then we went back to the waterbed, and it was good, it was better than anything or anybody before. But it wasn’t the best part.

The best part is that I will never, never be afraid of dying.

That, now—that’s better than seasoned grease.

Not an Affair

She cried out: "*I thought I loved him!*" She had cried and cried ever since she told him, ever since she had *had* to tell him about what had happened; she had cried through all of his anguished demands as to exactly what had happened, cried while she answered him truthfully, instant by instant of that evening and night, the innocent acceptance to cocktails, the acceptance of the ride home, then, then, then, what happened in the car.

Most of the night, half a day then, the questions, questions shouted, questions sobbed; the "Who was it?" questions, and their chain: "You don't know? How could you not know?"; the "How could you?" questions, with their "While I—," "When I—"; and the "At this of all times" chains: "While I sweat there in that rotten warehouse until two in the morning to get us a little extra, to get *you* a little extra," and "When I trusted you, have always trusted you," and "At this of all times, when we have to live apart, sleep apart..."

A love, a wedding, a honeymoon that went on and on for almost a year now; the exciting new job with a civilian firm in a foreign land, building a military base; and the lonely weeks when he went first; and the joy when her application was approved and she, too, could come; and the appalling news that until the housing area was completed they would have to live in bachelor quarters, she in her barracks, he in his, under the stiff-necked regulations of a base commander who went by the book (no cohabitation except in married quarters, and Marine guards under strict orders to enforce)—and "at this of all times," the one time when the commandant permitted a military/civilian celebration off the base, the one time when they had both been invited and he insisted she go while he rolled up some overtime in the warehouse, the one time she—she—it had happened, and with a stranger. Who was he? She didn't really know. Where was he? Gone, flown away that night on whatever function he had with the company. Or the military. She didn't even know that.

So it came down at last to the apparently endless chain of

demands—"Why? Why? Why did you do it?"—and there was no answer, none, none, for a day and a night and some hours to boot, until last she cried out: "I thought I loved him!"

The slow door of the ladies room closed itself on the click-buzz-hum of the big office. Ariadne Guelph passed through the inside door to find her friend May Stern crouched on the settee, hands between knees, slump-shouldered, a portrait of misery. "May, honey—whatever is the matter?"

The younger girl looked up slowly. "Ari. Oh. Ari."

Ariadne sat beside her, put an arm around her. "I heard old Bristle-chin telling someone over the phone that he can't get any work out of you today, or any sense either. What is it, Maisie? That's not like you."

"In there ..." May waved a hand toward the inner room and its row of booths.

"I'll see." She rose and looked inside, returned. "There's no one in there.... Tell me, dear."

May took Ariadne's hands and looked up at her with wistful eyes. "Ariadne, last night I—well, I ..."

"Let me guess. It was some guy."

Silently she nodded.

"And you made it with him."

Another nod. A quivering lip.

"Gosh, honey, it happens all the time. Who was it?"

The weeping began. "Th—that's just it. I don't *know*!"

"You were raped!"

"I wish I had been," and she laughed weakly through the tears. "Oh, that's crazy, of course not. What I mean ... I wanted to, I wanted ... him, I just didn't care. And I don't know why. And I don't know *him*."

"I think," said Ariadne firmly, "that this is just one of those things that can happen. No harm done, and you can forget it."

Little May more or less did, too, until she missed her next period.

Lynn was very happily married. At first she and Jon talked sometimes about having a child—dream stuff, "maybe someday" stuff, but it was never really an issue. And as time went by she

became increasingly convinced that it was just something which would never happen. And the pills and all that were such a nuisance; she quite forgot them some of the time, then all of the time.

Then she had her inexplicable adventure—she who was the least adventurous of women. She and a friend went into a bar—for the friend's thirst, not her own; she just didn't go to bars—and the friend gulped and left because of an appointment, and Lynn, who never gulped, stayed to finish her sipping. And then *he* was there, standing by the little table, sitting across from her, saying things she could no longer remember in a soft, deep voice ... oh, yes, she remembered one thing: "I do not want an affair, I want an experience," and a walk to, to wherever it was, not far, a warm, clean space for the bed ... the walk could not be recalled because of the thick cloud of wanting in which she drifted. It happened, and she was outside again walking with him, walking without him, and finally home, quite alone, totally bewildered, captured between the truth and disbelief.

By the time Jon got home she had decided not to tell him, and there really was no need to. Lynn was a very composed lady.

Evelyn was not a very composed lady, and she did tell Kevin when he got home; she had to, distraught as she was with astonished self-hatred. Kevin immediately beat the hell out of her. He beat her so badly that she called the police, and when they arrived he stood over her with a new insanity shining in his eyes so brightly that she did as he told her to do; and she said to the police that she had been raped, that Kevin had come home to find her in his battered condition. The moment she was alone at the police station she told the sympathetic women of the rape crisis unit what had really happened. So Kevin was arrested and jailed, and Evelyn went for frantic hours to everyone she could reach to gather enough money to bail him out. Shaken and well cooled, he went home with her and lay all night crying in her soothing arms.

A military base hospital is so very male-oriented that the presence of a woman with an obstetric difficulty seems somehow inappropriate, but no one can say why.

After her affair (no, it was not an affair, it was an experience), her husband would not touch her. When she underwent a pregnancy test, which he had stonily demanded, and it came out positive, he touched her even less; he touched her no more with his eyes, his voice.

And when, exactly at the time her next menses were due, she miscarried, he was flooded with joy, and became his old garrulous, affable self; but it was over for her, all over. He sat there in the hospital room with flowers in his hand, showering relieved gladness on a piece of stone, which would not come to life even when he said he forgave her.

Dr. Gerald Macomb McCambridge, head of the heavily funded and prestigious Genetic Research Laboratories, dialed a number and spoke: "Hi, Wacky." Nostalgic baby-talk: the name was Whickter, which became "Whiskey," then "Wicky," and finally "Wicky-wacky," which Professor Dr. Alonzo Frederick Whickter heartily detested; he gave it back: "Oh, hi, Macmac."

"I can look down this wire," said McCambridge without preliminary, "and see past your left shoulder and through that door into your filing cabinet a folder describing a prepartum female who, having committed whatever it takes to become pregnant, has passed one period and spontaneously aborted on the next."

"You've been peeking," said Whickter.

"I *am* peeking," said McCambridge. "I now read further down the file. The same ladies subsequently test sterile, due to a very slight malformation, or alteration, of the outer membrane of the ovum, rendering it impenetrable."

"How the hell did you know? I have twenty-two like that."

"I have forty-five," said McCambridge, "and I suspect that out there on my secretary's desk are a fair clutch more. But I'm not finished reading over this wire and through that door into your files." He cleared his throat. "Not a few of these patients are, or need to be, in psychiatric hands to pursue the conviction that they do not know who impregnated them nor how it was accomplished."

"Mac," said Whickter with no trace of banter left in his voice, "what the hell is it—an epidemic?"

McCambridge let silence fill the line.

Whickter drew a shuddering breath. "My God. I think you just said it was."

"You said it."

"How far has it gone?"

McCambridge shrugged, sure that the other man could sense the gesture. "As a general rule, what percentage of cases of any specific disorder show up in my labs or your practice? If you suddenly get five cases of toxic shock syndrome, how many can you estimate are in the general population?"

"I factor with a big number," conceded Whickter. "Of course—"

"Of course what?"

"I'd have to know the epicenters. Five cases in a neighborhood, a city, a seaboard—"

"What do you get from your files?"

"Minneapolis ... South Bend ... (two in South Bend, I think) ... Louisville. Quite a cluster in Louisville.... It's gone pretty far. Too far."

"London," said McCambridge "Metz, Casablanca, Capetown, Buenos Aires, Nairobi, and something in Hong Kong that looks very much like it."

"Oh, my God," Whickter said again, and this interested McCambridge very much; he had heard this expression from Alonzo Whickter perhaps twice since their college days. "You must have had your League of Nations on the prowl."

"Right," said McCambridge. His "League of Nations" was a very special group of graduate students, each as distinct a specimen of the various human subspecies as McCambridge had been able to find. Each kept close contact with his or her racial origins; for his special projects, McCambridge wanted as little dilution as possible.

"Then," said Whickter, "you already knew it was an epidemic."

"Let's say I was wondering if it could be."

"Mac, what shall we do? Call in the press, alert people?"

"The press," said McCambridge, having traveled this course before, "will not need any calling in. When the media become aware of it, they'll come. And right here is where they'll come to. Calling in the press before you have a diagnosis, and especially before you can point at a treatment, is pushing a quite unnecessary panic button. Tell me: have any of your patients suffered permanently, aside from emotional trauma?"

“Not really. Not so far.”

“All right. Now here is something you, as dean of a school of gynecology and obstetrics, can do, something I’d rather not stir up from this source. I need data on unaffected carriers.”

“Like Typhoid Mary.”

“Not like Typhoid Mary. Like men. Go from the hypothesis that if the man had contact with a woman who has had this—what?—plague, and then has contact with another woman, what chance has a second woman got to contact the disease?”

“I think I can get you some data.”

“I think you can. And if you can find out at what stage the male picks up the bug—that is, if the contact occurs during a pregnancy or after the miscarriage, spontaneous aborting, whatever you call it—that would be valuable.”

“I’ll try.”

McCambridge said very quietly. “It’s kind of urgent, Alonzo.”

“I’ll do it.”

“I know you will. Goodnight.”

All night long Dr. McCambridge’s teletype chuckled as it recorded reports. Bahia. Provincetown. Manila. Addis Ababa. Tel Aviv. Edmonton ...

“May, honey! Are you all right? You took a day off.”

“Am I all right? I’m more than all right! I lost it!”

“You lost what?”

“Shh. Gossip I don’t need.... You know, what you came in to talk to me about. That time. In the ladies’.”

“Oh, my goodness. Don’t tell me you were—”

“I was, but I’m not. Not anymore. And I didn’t have to go to a—to the doctor, either. It just, well, it’s gone, that’s all.”

“You never told me! I never dreamed—”

“I didn’t want to worry you. And something else: I’ve met the most marvelous man.... Tell you at lunch.”

Lynn composedly told Jon that she was expecting, and he was overjoyed, so much so that it was easy for her to conclude that what he didn’t know could hurt him very much. They had a marvelous, romantic month during which he handed her into and out of the car, helped her up steps, carried every package even

though it might hold no more than a comb, until she discovered one rather messy morning that they had nothing to expect. At this news Jon expressed sadness, but it was a rather modified sadness. It seemed to have under it a stratum of something else, something not the least sad. This was revealed when he consoled the deprived would-be mother with, "After all, we really have a full life together. In a way, another, ah, person, would dilute it, hm?" He smiled then, and took a breath which considerably expanded his broad chest. "I've got to say, though, that it did something for me to learn that I could do it after all. Not that I was really worried or anything. And the fact that you couldn't carry it doesn't change that at all."

"Oh," she said composedly.

Dr. McCambridge had hoped to be approached first by one of the large newsmagazines, with good writing and a sizable and energetic research staff; or at least a major city newspaper, part of a chain that would cover the country—foreign press, please copy. These were, however, scooped by a supermarket tabloid that specialized in gross gossip, flying saucers, arthritis pain, and the intimate conduct of stars and high bureaucrats. Dr. McCambridge paused for a moment to consider whether or not to grant the appointment, and then sighed and, from somewhere in the depths of his worldly wisdom, recognized that the impact of these tabloids was upward by way of the underbelly and not downward to the brain; that is to say, they crossed the breakfast table and the bar more readily than did more respectable periodicals. It had to come out sooner or later; it *must* come out, and perhaps it were better done through "I read somewhere that—" or "They're saying that—" than by accurately quoting a trusted source.

"Let him in."

The reporter was something of a surprise. About him was none of his employer's sleaziness, carelessness, or flash. Young, articulate, and bright-eyed, he had done a good deal of homework. He knew quite as much as any layman about the Genetic Research organization and its work, and he knew the towering stature of the man to whom he was talking. He was polite and he was relentless. His name was Szigeti, and after the handshake his opening gun was, "I want the truth about what's

happening.”

“You’ve got it,” said McCambridge easily. “It’s raining.”

Szigei’s head cocked, birdlike, and his lips twitched. “Perhaps I’d better start over.”

McCambridge smiled and nodded.

“I think there’s an epidemic.”

“I think so, too. There’s an influenza strain called Australian Beta that looks quite ominous. There is herpes simplex II, and I understand that some countries have abandoned mass inoculations and we’re looking at yellow fever again.”

“You know what I’m talking about.”

“I do?”

Szigei made a slight motion which encompassed the entire imposing complex of the Genetic Research establishment. “None of those have anything to do with your specialty.”

“What has, then?”

Szigei leaned forward. “I just keep hearing a story—the same story over and over, but from all kinds of people in all kinds of places. Somebody’s wife or girlfriend gets pregnant, and then she loses it—real soon, second month.”

“It happens.”

“Sure it happens, has happened. But—maybe because I’m a reporter—I get this itch. I mean, if somebody walks down the street knocking his head with his fist every time he passes a lamppost, that’s just another nut. But when six, ten, twenty people start doing it, I get this itch.... Has anybody come to you with this yet?”

“Nobody in the media, if that’s what you mean.”

“That isn’t what I meant, but I’m pleased to hear it.” He had a good smile.

“Does your itch suggest anything else?”

“No. Well, maybe yes. Maybe it’s too early to tell. Maybe what these women, these couples are going through have some spooked; they don’t want to risk it again. But I haven’t heard yet that any woman who has lost one this way has been able to get pregnant again.”

“Not *able*?”

“Well, I guess I can’t really say that. But *you* might. That’s what made me think of coming here.”

“What does her doctor say?”

"Whose doctor? Jesus," Szigeti breathed. After a moment, he said, "I've heard about you, Dr. McCambridge. Now I believe everything I've heard. You guessed it. My wife. Mattie. We have one kid. We wanted another; she lost it. There was nothing wrong with her the first time and there's nothing wrong with her now, or me."

"Your doctor says."

"Our doctor says. And he says keep trying." Szigeti's mouth twitched at the corner. "We keep trying. Everything. Eight months now since we went through what's written in her files, what they call SA: spontaneous abortion."

"I'm sorry," McCambridge said with all his heart.

"Not your fault," said Szigeti brusquely. He withdrew a very clean handkerchief and blew his nose and put the handkerchief away. "I guess when you have one thing uppermost in your head day and night, it colors everything you do and think about. So I began looking around me, and I began hearing the same story over and over again." He wet his lips and leaned forward with that sharp-eyed, birdlike cock of the head. "Working for a scandal sheet has its advantages. Sure it's out for sensation even if it has to knock the corners off the truth to get it. And yes, it has done a lot of damage to some good people, but I have to say there's not as much of that as there was, and there will be less. But you know, I can investigate a lot of things the respectable press wouldn't touch. Invent a pill that really does cure arthritis and I'll run the story next week while your kind—sorry, Doctor—hide it away for six years of animal and human tests and evaluations. Meanwhile, millions of people will go on hurting with any real hope. I can maybe get them no pills, but I can get them the hope. ... I'm making a speech."

"It's a good speech," said McCambridge. "Make more."

Szigeti looked startled, then grateful. "If there is a really genuine saucer landing or Bigfoot sighting, I guarantee someone like me will be there first, because I get there fast because I want it to be real, and not like a *Time* or *Newsweek* researcher who gets there slowly because he or she wants it denied. Not only that: who buys my paper? Mostly people checking out at supermarkets—all kinds of people with their eggs and bread and toothpaste and deodorants. They'll talk to me in ways they never would to reporters from the glossy press. They will tell me what they

believe and what they want to believe. I can start more of a groundswell through and through the population before the big-name newsmagazines even know it's there; and that goes for the wire services and broadcast as well ... and sometimes they never do know it's there until some joker wins an election by a ninety percent landslide, all the polls upset, all the experts with egg on their faces.... The media talk to each other, Doctor. It's easy to see that the people who write for the *Atlantic Monthly* and the 'little' literary poetry magazines write only for the people who read them. It isn't as easy to see that same thing is true of the national press. I write for everybody there is."

"I like it. I especially like your use of the word *media* as a plural." McCambridge leaned back to smile. "I'm glad you came."

Szigei's lips performed a brief whimsical twist. "That," he said, "I'm really not used to from people like you."

"There are no people like me," said McCambridge without arrogance. "Yes, it is an epidemic."

There is an experience that should have its own special term; it is the experience of running up six steps of a five-step flight of stairs, and falling flat at the top. Szigei, when he had recovered from this metaphorical disorientation, slowly brought out his notebook, by his expression asking permission.

McCambridge waved his hand. "Go ahead." When the reporter had found his page, he said, "It's a viroid. A new one."

"Did you say virus?"

"I said *viroid*. It's a weird little thing. 'Little.' That's an understatement. I mean *small*... When viruses were first discovered, they used to call them 'filterable viruses.' Nobody had ever seen one; nobody ever did until the electron microscope was invented. They were discovered when it was found that a filter fine enough to strain out bacteria was not fine enough to filter out viruses. It was found that the fluid that came through the filter could cause virus diseases, and for a time it was thought that the fluid itself was some sort of disease-causing solution, a liquid organic chemical. But finally the virus was identified for what it is—a kind of metalife, a sort of living crystal. You know what these filters were made of?"

Szigei shook his head.

"Porcelain. And if they can get through porcelain, they can get through almost anything, even rubber. That's the virus. The

viroid is *much* smaller. It's nothing but a little fleck of nucleic acid that acts like a bit of DNA without the protein coding that DNA has. These technicalities aren't exactly sensational."

"Not yet."

"Well then, here it comes. Nobody knows how many, or how many *kinds* of these dustmotes are drifting around in the organic machinery. Most of 'em just get lost. One or two, however, do seem to be specific. There's one that causes a kind of lymphoma, a kind of leukemia. It does this by slipping into the DNA molecule and replacing one of the—what you might call—the control modules. The thing is, this altered DNA replicates. I mean, all that can happen pretty fast.

"That's enough background. What we have here is a viroid that drifts around in the blood and lymph systems until it encounters the unique structure of a fertilized egg, and does something—we don't know what—to the whole egg factory itself. What happens then is that the fertilized ovum goes on to the uterus in a normal way, attaches itself to the wall, and then goes wild. In six weeks or so the body recognizes that something's going on that's not quite right, and right on schedule menstruation—now called SA, spontaneous abortion—occurs, and out comes the damaged fetus. Just as well, too; in no way could it come to term."

"I get it. But what about my idea that from then on the woman can't conceive any more?"

"I was coming to that. The other thing this altered DNA does—oh, and it's such a tiny, minuscule thing—is to slightly change the outer integument of the ripening ovum, so that sperm can't penetrate it. Maybe it's tougher, or maybe, like a normal fertilized egg, it sends out a signal that conception has already occurred. Every egg that ripens after that will do the same thing. ... I have to say I'm impressed. We have people up to their necks in this research, and not one of them has really understood what this means. And you do."

"Somebody once used the phrase 'to think the unthinkable, one must accept the unacceptable,' " said the reporter. "I was born with a head that does that, and it hasn't always been an asset, because it produces mountains of nonsense. Just once in a while it comes up with a nugget."

"A statistical necessity," smiled McCambridge. "Shovel enough manure, and you're bound to discover a horse."

Szigeti laughed briefly, sobered, and said, "Maybe this comes from a layman's ignorance, but if this change in the whole body's DNA happens, doesn't it become heritable?"

"It does."

Szigeti placed his hands flat on the pages of his notebook and lowered his head. There was a long silence, in which McCambridge could almost hear the flickering, the penetrations of many points here, and here, and here, of a polished, needle-pointed mental rapier. He was even aware of the very moment when the needle sank into the only possible penetrable target.

Szigeti raised his head slowly. His face was pale. "How contagious is this?"

"Very."

"How much of it is there by now?"

McCambridge slid open his flat central drawer and withdrew a stack of teletypes. He passed them across to the reporter—eleven pages, a list. "These are the locations of known outbreaks. It is certainly partial. The compilation is made only from the discovery of only one case in each location, and where there is one, there will be more. Yes, my friend, there is an epidemic."

Szigeti leafed through the sheets. "What's causing it?" He whispered.

McCambridge shrugged. "What do you like? Sunspots. Pollution. Recombinants escaped from a laboratory. A mad scientist. International terrorists. A superpower out to dominate the world. A master criminal with the secret cure, with blackmail and ransom in mind. Aliens from outer space. Your choice, Mr. Szigeti; all grist to the mill. Especially your mill."

Szigeti put the teletypes down as if afraid they might explode. "You can't joke about this. This is the end of the world."

"Live with it as long as I have and you'll joke about it. You'll have to."

"I'm sorry. Yes, of course." For at least the third time the reporter looked at McCambridge as if he were seeing something, someone, altogether new. "Where did it begin? You people know where flu strains begin; you give them names: Australia, Hong Kong."

McCambridge tapped the teletypes. "Can you tell from looking at these?"

"No way. It's all over." He looked up. "In more ways than one."

It's all over," he said again, convincing that within himself which refuse to believe. "There is no cure?"

Again McCambridge answered without answering.

"No prevention?"

"Celibacy. Not," he added ironically, "that that's cured anything so far except maybe joy.... And my fairly well-educated guess is that this minuscule little pile of chemicals is going to have its way eventually even with celibates. Widespread enough, the viroid would be happy to travel on cases and sneezes. Why not? Viruses do, some of 'em. And any exposed male is a carrier. Like with some yeast infections, the male has no symptoms and can still carry. Difference is, with this one, he has no symptoms and he will carry, once exposed."

"How ... how long do we have?"

"The human race? Why, everybody now alive will live a long and happy life. Or a long and unhappy one. Or a short one. Beyond that I have nothing to say.... Mr. Szigeti—don't look at me that way. I know I handed you a blockbuster, but you're making me feel like the messenger in the old days bringing bad news, knowing the king would have them killed because of it."

"I—God, I don't think you caused the epidemic."

"I'm relieved to hear that. Now go write your scoop. And—Szigeti—keep in touch. I like you."

The reporter went to the door, turned, tried to speak, took out his handkerchief, blew his nose, departed.

Top scientist says:

THIS IS THE END OF THE WORLD

Worldwide Epidemic Sterilizes Women

Dr. Gerald Macomb McCambridge of the internationally famous Genetic Laboratories stated, in an exclusive interview with this paper, that mankind faces extinction within two generations. His assertion—a highly contagious disease has appeared all over the world and will result in the inability of women everywhere to bear children—is borne out by reports from an increasing number of doctors and hospitals of the appearance of the mysterious plague.

Not since the dreaded Black Plague of the Middle Ages has

there been....

“Honey, you feel all right?”

“I feel just fine.”

“Look here what it says in the paper.”

“... loss of the fertilized ovum in six weeks, and thereafter incapable of ...’ but I couldn’t’ve had that; I tell you, I got no plague, I feel fine.”

“Well, it says here there are no other symptoms, that ... here it is: ‘otherwise the disease has no other effect.’ ”

“Well, anything to sell the paper, you know that. I tell you, there’s nothing wrong, I feel just fine.... Oh Sammy, I’m scared. I’m so scared....”

A clothing manufacturer in downtown Los Angeles began production of filmy ladies’ T-shirts emblazoned with the words: I’VE HAD IT.

Breaking the news in this way was a stroke of genius. The ink was still wet on the first printing when Dr. McCambridge’s phone rang. It was an attorney suggesting himself as Dr. McCambridge’s counsel in a lawsuit against the paper for malicious defamation. McCambridge suggested that the attorney go back to chasing ambulances; he was out of his league. And after that no one called Dr. McCambridge on the subject of the epidemic for three days. The news was soaking up from below; so many believed nothing that ‘scandal sheet’ ever printed that the truth came to them gradually. By the time the wire services began to be aware of the story, by the time city editors got around to sending out reporters, by the time broadcast news directors got their writers banging out their scripts on the big-type typewriters, more than half the population knew.

After the three days, of course, it was trickle to flood to deluge. McCambridge gave interviews to the top three newsmagazines, two wire services, three women’s magazines, and the raunchiest pornography monthly on the market (on the grounds the porn mag would reach all the readers the other magazines did not). Thereafter he dictated a cassette (which he rephrased every forty-eight hours, calling each an ‘update’), left standing orders not to be disturbed by anyone, particularly doctors and politicians, and

hid in his lab, ostensibly in search of a cure—which was a lie.

It was pretty wild at first: a rush to the churches and temples, sometimes by the most improbable people; a flood tide of aggression against persons, against nations, quelled almost immediately by a larger tide of sobriety, reflection, self-examination. Acquisition—of goods, companies, funds—went to unheard-of peaks and then plunged as more and more people began to wonder if it were really useful to own such a lot for such a little. Regrettably, there were some suicides, but the overall suicide rate began to decline; why accelerate the inevitable?

McCambridge called Szigeti in. The young reporter was sallow, drawn; if he continued to carry whatever it was that burdened him, he would not be called ‘young’ very much longer.

“I’ve been thinking about a cure,” said McCambridge.

“Who hasn’t?” said Szigeti dolefully.

“And I wanted your thoughts.”

“You wanted *my* thoughts?”

“Get off the ‘awe’ bit,” McCambridge said testily. “I like the way your head works and I don’t think it works like mine. So throw mine and yours into the same hopper and we’ll turn the handle; something new might grind out.”

Szigeti leaned back, closed his eyes. “Thoughts about a cure.” He was silent for a time. He opened his eyes. “We need it; that’s the bottom line.” He paused. “Maybe the planet doesn’t need it; it gets along fine with extinct species.” (McCambridge nodded approvingly.) “But we damn well do.” He paused again. “One thing I’ve been lying awake with is if we could choose among a whole variety of cures, which would be the best one? I mean, I know that if one can be found right now, we grab it, whatever it was to go but suppose we had a choice? And what got to me, from what I’ve learned about this rotten species that I ... love so much, man the destroyer, man the builder ... hit me if I get poetic, Doctor.”

“Why on earth should I? Go on.”

“I think if we had a choice of cures, some pretty powerful effort would be made to see to it that the cure went only to the right kind of people. White people, say. Or Jews. Or rich people. Or

Baptists. I guess I knew this before, but it wasn't until the epidemic that I really *knew* what I've always sort of known: that faced with real disaster, we tend to hang together, but as soon as the heat is off, it takes only seconds for 'Me First' to show up. So. ...” Another long closed-eyes pause. “So if there ever is a cure, I would hope it was something available to everybody everywhere, rich, poor, emerging, whatever. Not something secret and owned by somebody who wanted to be paid for it. Not something that needed high technology processing ... Not that I wouldn't want to see that kind of cure, or any other cure.”

“I understand. You're talking optimums. This is sort of a weird coincidence, you know.”

“What coincidence?”

“Every bit of our research points to a single possible treatment that could reverse the viroid effect that's behind this thing. Nothing known will attack the viroid directly—not without bombing everything around it. The only approach is to create an environment in which it can't replicate. The only thing that can do this is a very complex protein that is at one stage lethal, and at another, nutritious. Example: the akee.”

“The what?”

“Akee. It's a handsome fruit that grows wild in Jamaica particularly, though it is happy to grow anywhere with that climate. It's a strange looking thing, bright red-orange, with a shiny black pit that is half inside and half outside the rind. It looks ripe before it is ripe. When it is ripe it's delicious, cooked with salt fish—it's practically a Jamaican national dish. But if you eat it before it's ripe it can kill you.

“Another vegetable with the right characteristics, also a protein poison, is the fava bean, and this one will grow virtually anywhere that anything will grow. Eaten raw, it's pretty deadly. Cooked, it's very sustaining, with trace minerals and vitamins, and a really efficient protein and a good measure of carbohydrates and oil.

“Every test we can devise—and we devise a lot around here—indicates that at the exact stage at which these poison proteins turn into real food, they are in an intermediate, interface stage. Catch it there, screen it out, and feed it to someone with the plague, and it will create an environment that—well, to avoid the gobbledygook—that coats the viroidal DNA with glue. It doesn't

kill it or remove it; the viroidal DNA just can't *do* anything, and it dies. It's replaced by what it's used to—the original DNA structure. An ovum fertilized at that time will be normal and will come to term."

Szigeti had begun to breathe hard and irregularly, like a hurt child about to cry. "I think ... you're telling me ... that there is a cure."

McCambridge leaned back and beamed at him. "Yup. And that's your scoop for today."

Szigeti had a new clean handkerchief. Did he change them twice a day? McCambridge waited until he had put it away and then said, "'Cure' is a peculiar name for it, but it can spread fast like any other four-letter word."

"I've got to know more. Are there any side effects?"

"*Damn it!*" McCambridge roared. "You've just pushed my number one crusade button. *There are no side effects*, you hear that? There are no side effects! 'Side effects' is a piece of semantic wizardry, a brainwashing trick, foisted on the world by the marketing people in so-called 'ethical' drug companies. I could write an ad, medical-journal style, for the Pill, with a big headline—FOR SWOLLEN ANKLES, BLOOD CLOTS, AND NAUSEA—and a long list in small print of side effects: among them, *it may act as a contraceptive*. You get what I'm saying? Compound a drug, you put in big words what you want to do, and in little words all the other things it does, and you call all those other things side effects. *There are no side effects!* You get that? They're only *effects*. From now on, any time you find yourself saying 'side effects'—bite your tongue!"

"Wow!" said Szigeti admiringly.

McCambridge relaxed, leaned back and laughed, wiping his brow with a tissue. "I do go off bang sometimes, don't I? Well: effects. The vegetable protein I described can be prepared in quantity very cheaply from akees and fava. Fava especially can be grown anywhere and harvested quickly. The only precision part of the process is to get the transitory stage out of the product and isolate it, but that can be done with automatic machinery. What you come up with is a gray-green paste that tastes kind of good until you realize it's going to be your sole sustenance for two months or more. And I mean sole sustenance; anything else, even salt, with it and you've diluted or canceled it. And it won't work.

“And that isn’t the only *effect*. The nutritious protein sustains the patient adequately, but there’s enough of the poisonous protein left in it to make the patient feel nauseated a lot of the time, with occasional dizziness, double vision, and the like. *And* some of the hair will fall out and the skin will get scaly and dry.”

“Both men and women?”

“Only women. Men would have the same symptoms, but there’s no immunity. The viroid’s too widespread; it just wouldn’t do any good.”

“You mean people will have to go through this every time they want a child?”

“They will. Of course, the ultimate reward is that they will have a child. Also,” he added, “the hair will grow back better than before and the skin will recover without fine wrinkles, really renewed.”

“But surely medical technology can get to a one-shot treatment. You’ve done it before.”

McCambridge snorted. “How long has it taken medical technology to find a one-shot cure for rabies—the very first disease subject to a miracle treatment? No, my friend, not with this bug. It’s the nature of the beast. We’ll keep trying, of course, but this is another one like the rabies cure; we’re stuck with a primitive, painful course of treatment for years and years to come. But Szigeti—we’ll have those years now and we’ll have them for everybody. Go write it, boy; it’s all yours. And—my regards to your wife and kid. Kids.”

Heard all over the world, in many languages:

“If you think for one minute I’m going through that just have your kid, buster, you better think again.”

“I know I don’t have to take the treatment with you, Sue, but I want to. I want to go through what you go through.” “You can’t.” “Why can’t I?” “Because you can’t have a baby, and I can. Because I’m a woman, Eve’s curse, you know. And even if I get bald and crinkly, I don’t want a lover with his dear hair falling out.” “Oh, I love you.”

“I saw one of them today, she wore a veil over her whole head and face. And everyone stood aside for her, like she was something holy. Because she would have a baby.”

“Sell your rubber stock and get into akee orchards. There’s a

classic buck in akee orchards.”

A long time later.

“Hello ... Dr. McCambridge?”

“Hello ... Wacky? Whickter?”

“Dr. Whickter here, yes.”

“Why the formality?”

“Because this may be the last word I ever speak to you. I wouldn’t even go this far but for a sense of fairness. I need my suspicions confirmed, and I want to know if you can possibly explain your motives. Or defend them.”

“Oh my, oh my, you are on a high horse. What wickedness do you think I’ve committed?”

“What wickedness?...” (hard breathing.) “... Let me put it this way: What would a man have to be to concoct a dangerous disease and bring the whole world to the brink of ultimate extinction, just to snatch it back again at the last moment?”

“He’d have to be damned accomplished,” said McCambridge gleefully. “He might even have a cure first.”

“I’m in a special position to figure this out,” said the telephone. “I’ve known a man like that for very long time. Very well. He would have to have almost unlimited funding. He’d have to have a profound background in genetics and biology and molecular theory. He’d have to have been a top consultant on population growth, and have traveled all over the world for many years where he saw the very worst effects of exploding populations. He’d have to have a special group of loyal undergraduates of every ethnic variety to touch off a manufactured plague simultaneously in so many places that the source could never be discovered. And he’d have to be an obsessive, arrogant son of a bitch.”

“Oh, you forgot a couple of things, Wacky. He’d have to have a pheromone so ingeniously compounded that it would make his operative irresistible to women—but only to women who were ovulating.”

“There is no such thing.”

“You’re right. But let’s hypothesize that there were. Let us recall that all female mammals undergo a period of estrus, heat, rut. When that happens there are glandular changes of many kinds affecting the animal and its surroundings and behaviors in

many ways.”

“But not human females.”

“Not human females. Yet at the time of ovulation there are certain traces of that phenomenon. Mittelschmerz, the sharp abdominal pain some women feel at the moment a ripe ovum moves out. Certain changes of mood, of body and breath odors, of susceptibility—like and dislike—of external odors. More women surrender to seduction and even rape when they are ovulating than when they are not. Granted these things are almost disappearingly subtle, the fact is that they are there, buried in the complexities of the white brain and the endocrines. Vestigial they might be, but so is the abductor minimi digit muscle on the outside of your foot, and it can be brought back by the right stimulus, or even by concentration. So! If such an agent is armed with a pheromone so designed that it totally reactivates estrus in the highest, brainless, gland-driven form, and if he has a second weapon in its way just as powerful, it would not be difficult at all to scatter the seed in the most efficient way. Of course,” he added quickly, overriding the sputtering from the telephone, “such a supreme aphrodisiac does not exist, if it ever did. An ethical person would see to it that it was destroyed utterly, beyond discovery or recovery.”

Whickter’s snortings revealed an inner conflict; then: “What second weapon?”

“I don’t know, of course, but I was told about it a long time ago by an old college chum. It’s a line, a single sentence. I was told that the student who used it batted a thousand. He would simply say, at the right tender moment, “I want an experience. I do not want an affair.” He used to say that there were millions of women just aching to hear someone say that; who had many fantasies but who were afraid to go for them for fear of involvement and entanglements.”

“You really are a son of a bitch,” said Whickter; but he laughed. He then said sententiously, “But I still can’t see any decency in a man’s bringing about worldwide terror just to satisfy an obsession about overpopulation.”

“Overpopulation?” roared McCambridge. “Is that what you’re thinking? Gerard O’Neill’s space settlements will take care of overpopulation forever. The Club of Rome was wrong: there are no limits to growth, not for this species.”

Then he said very quietly, “No, Wacky; whoever did it, did it so that never, never again on this world or within this species, will there be such a thing as an unwanted child.”

Black Moccasins

Even though Laughlin had damn well made up his mind, he hesitated, looking up at the fourth-floor front. It was evening, just dark enough to make the lights come on in the apartments, and her light was on all right, and it wasn't shining through blue drapes anymore.

Pink.

Blue is for boys; pink is for girls, he thought sardonically, squinting up. Not that he cared if she had any boys up there. That's what he'd told her, anyway.

And anyway, it wasn't really pink. Salmon. He walked up to the front entrance and into the foyer with the whole wall full of mail-slots and the two tall rows of pushbuttons with name-tags, one row on each side of the brass speaker grille. Habit twitched his hand toward his pocket, toward the keys he didn't have anymore.

Salmon, how about that. He reached to thumb the button marked B4, but stopped when he saw the tag. Square white letters on black, it didn't say just LAUGHLIN anymore. It said M. SVOBODA-LAUGHLIN. With a hyphen. Svoboda was her maiden name. *A hyphen. How about that.*

He thumbed the button. The bars on the speaker grille combed her voice out thin. "Yes?"

"Me."

She didn't answer with the words, or a word, but the electric lock buzzed and he pushed the door open. He used to go up the stairs two at a time. Quicker. Keep in shape. Get to the door breathing hard, it always made her laugh, or anyway smile. This time he walked past the stairs and took the elevator. Slower.

Down the corridor to B4. Another button to push. He had an idea that she stood just inside, purposely waiting a little before she opened the door, but why would she do that?

She opened the door. "Maudie."

"Hello, Flip." She turned away, hardly looking at him, and walked inside, leaving him to come in and closed the door. He

did, and followed her into the living room. With a light on this side, the drapes weren't salmon. Burnt something. Siena.

She turned to face him, saying, "You're looking—" at the same time he was saying, "well ..." so they both stopped. She said, "Sit down. Want coffee?"

"No," he said and suddenly became aware of that posture, with a small fist pushed into the small palm, the eyes studying the hands, which meant tension, waiting, not knowing what to expect; and he realized that his "no" might have meant about sitting, or about coffee, and she didn't know which or what that might mean. He sat down. Her hands came apart and she said, "I'll get coffee." She went through the archway into the little kitchen and ran water, while he looked around the room. The big chair and the couch were the same. There was a new fuzzy rug, yellow, small, laid right over the wall-to-wall carpet. He thought with some reluctance that it really didn't look too bad with those drapes. The mantle over the artificial fireplace was empty. He called out, "You could've kept the horse."

Her voice drifted out to him, "Oh no ... you always, well, I mean, it was really yours, the horse. Unicorn."

Which brought back the anger-pain, the tender-anger, the there's-really-no-name for it two hours they had spent separating their stuff, each of them determined to take this, too willing to yield that. It had been pretty awful. And anyway, once he'd taken the unicorn, he'd found no real room for it at his place. He opened his mouth to suggest that he bring it back some time but closed it again. The one thing he was really sure about in this awkward moment was that she wouldn't get the idea he had come here to initiate a series of visits. What he should do is just pick up his box and go. It was right there waiting for him at the bottom of the oh.

Bedroom closet.

He discovered that he had half risen; that he had actually begun to get up to go back there into the bedroom to pick up the one thing she'd agreed to keep for him. He sank back down, hot-faced. Not that he cared one way or the other, but what would she think, coming back in here to find him gone, rummaging around in the ...

"Flip—I—" She was standing in the archway to the kitchen. "Maude, I was thinking, why don't I just—" and again they spoke

simultaneously and stopped. At which point the whistling teakettle began to scream, and she ducked back out of his sight.

This is just too stupid, he thought in sudden indignation. Hadn't he already said he didn't want coffee? So all right, she was tense, well, so was he; perfectly understandable. All he wanted was the box of junk she was keeping for him; so take it and go.

"Here's your coffee," she said, coming out of the kitchen with the tray, the oval one with the butterfly wings under its glass floor. That had been his mother's; he never had been crazy about it but Maude just loved it. She'd made herb tea herself too. She never drank coffee. She set the tray down on the coffee table. It had the cream in it already, and for sure, honey. He never took sugar. She sat down, not beside him, but in the occasional chair across from him.

Oh, well.... "I came for my box."

"You said," she replied briefly. "When you called."

He picked up his cup. Mug. A pedestal mug, blue and white, with a thick handle. It felt good to his hand. It felt good against his mouth and the coffee against his tongue was just right, which for some reason infuriated him. He looked across at her. She had not touched her tea. She was looking intently at him, pressing one fist into her other palm, and when she met his eyes, dropped her gaze.

He said, "I've been thinking ... if it's all the same to you, that box is full of just junk. I mean, the stamp catalog is way out of date and I've really got no more use for the magazines. That tool set, well, there's no way to get another lens for it." It was a kind of flashlight with a transparent dome with a chuck on it, which could hold a variety of tools and a screw-starter; the very first time he had used it with a screwdriver the dome had cracked. He'd never seen another like it; he'd had it for years. "And the chinchilla book, well, let's face it, I'm never going to have a chinchilla farm. I'm sorry it all took up so much sp—so much of your space, Maudie. All I really want out of it is the black moccasins."

The black moccasins.... A long time before he met and married Maud Svoboda he'd worn those moccasins—and worn them and worn them. In the years before he'd acquired the dealership, he had at times been very poor; there had been long stretches when the black moccasins were the only shoes he had. Sometimes he

couldn't even afford the liquid scuff polish that suited them so well, especially when they creased and developed little breaks in the high points of the cracks. And although he kept them glossy, age and usage took their toll. There were times when he was careful not to elevate his feet or to sit on the grass or a bleacher in such a way that the holes in the soles might show. For all that, they were the most comfortable footwear he ever had; and they were more than that; they were trusted old companions.

For a while he drove an ancient VW, and the hole in the sole of his left shoe grew so large that once in a while it would capture the little clutch pedal on the left shoe. And one day, crossing a parking lot, he walked carelessly through the remnants of a broken bottle, ground almost to its original sand by repeated crushing by automobile tires. But a sliver of glass—no more, really, than a thorn or splinter, ran into his foot—a sharp reminder that measures should be taken.

Flip Laughlin, in those early days, was a connoisseur of the “day-old”—his name not only for past-date baked goods, but that basket in the rear corner of supermarkets where dwelt bent cans, broken cartons, punctured and taped bags of rice and flour, and the like, all at very reduced prices. The preoccupation extended to special sales, “cents-off” offers, double coupons, and rebates. He always felt triumphant, a beater of the system, when he had taken advantage of these tattered temptations and generous gifts from the loss-leading fraternity.

And so it came about that on the very day he felt the bee-sting of glass in the ball of his foot, he parked his old car and saw, in the gutter, a discarded pair of shoes. The uppers were worn and torn, but the bottoms of one-piece, superfirm sole and heel, had well outworn the uppers, and were in fine condition. Flip Laughlin, grinning, snapped open the Buck knife he always carried on his belt, and sliced off the ruined tops. He had in his secret hoard a three-dollar refund from a motor-oil company, and just that morning he'd noticed an advertisement for a \$16 glue gun, which applied heated glue which cooled into firmness in less than a minute—and it was on sale for three days for nine dollars. He bought one, applying the rebate check to the deal, and therefore wound up with his shoes renewed sufficiently to double their already long life, and had a glue gun to boot. Judicious application of his liquid scuff polish and a touch of the hot glue

to the occasionally reappearing holes and cracks in the worn uppers kept the old moccasins fitting and friendly for years.

Maud had hated them from the day she saw them, but she quickly became aware of what they meant to Flip, to whom they were a pride and a badge of thrift and ingenuity, even after he became prosperous, and he wore them often.

All of this, with a charge of affection and pride for himself and the treasured old shoes, were in his voice now as he said ... "All I really want out of the box is the black moccasins."

He lifted the pedestaled mug to his lips and sipped on the good coffee, and looked over the rim at Maud, who sat pressuring her hands, who dropped her eyes, who said, "But you didn't put them in the box, Flip."

"I thought I did."

"Really you didn't. You packed the box yourself, and you said ..."

"Maud!"

Her voice dropped almost a whisper. "... you said to throw everything else out."

"You didn't!"

Her silence, her rounded eyes, answered him.

He put his mug down with a bang. A little brown tongue of coffee jeered up at him and collapsed back into the cup. "But you *know* what they meant to me!"

She said, still fearfully but with a certain asperity, "Flip Laughlin, you threw out quite a lot of things that meant a lot to you that day!"

He shook his head slowly side to side. "My mocs. My old black mocs...." He was too shocked even to feel anger.

"Flip ... I'm as sorry as I can be." She put out a hand as if to touch him, then left it extended, as if forgotten. Speechless, he simply looked at her for a long moment, and then stood up.

She rose to, briefly flicking her gaze right and left, looking for something, looking for some way to—"Flip, wait. Wait! Don't...."

"Don't what?"

"I shouldn't ask you, I ... guess. The box. It's awful heavy. Would you ..."

A twisted thing rose in Flip Laughlin at that; something like, if he did her a favor at this point it would be a punishment for her—although you certainly could not have expressed it that way.

But he said, "Where is it?"

She turned and he followed her into the bedroom. The bedroom. The bedroom. The same old granny crazy-quilt. She opened the closet door and he stepped past her, backhanding a long skirt of that turquoise dress she wore that time at the.... There was the box. He bent to get his fingers under it and saw, gleaming beside it, the black moccasins. Dumbfounded, he stood up, holding them.

They were new black moccasins, glove-soft, hand-stitched, smooth as a woman's cheek inside. He turned to stare at her.

She said with difficulty, "Just exactly your size."

He looked from her to the moccasins. All he could say was "Years. It would take years."

"Yes," she whispered. "And you can wear them every single day. You can wear them wherever we go."

Something happened to Flip Laughlin then that had never happened in all his life, and was not to happen ever again in all his years. He uttered a long bleat, and burst into terrible tears, and when he came to himself he was lying on the crazy-quilt in his wife's arms with a shoe in each hand.

The Trick

Michaelmas was fifty-five, hale and sharp and very alive. Sounds like a song lyric, don't it? Well, he felt like a song lyric. His business was Big Business, and he'd made it to the top. But it wasn't always so. He was first to admit that he climbed up there on other people's faces. He been all the names you know: miser, skinflint, robber baron, all that.

Until Apricot.

Not apricot the jam, the jelly, the little peach, the sweetmeat (sweet as her meat might be), but Apricot the girl. It was Apricot, who, way back when, took to visiting veterans' hospitals (which damn few people ever do) and discovered how little attention was being paid to whatever personal parts they (the residents) had that had not been shot off. She'd rounded up a crew of like-minded girls to minister to these matters in bed.

It was Apricot who, upon finding the results so beneficial, widened her group's attention to men who had paraplegia of the mind and heart (if you follow me), men like Mr. Michaelmas used to be. They kidnapped Michaelmas and other men like that, hid them, fed them, fucked them until they got their juices running again, and turned them loose on the world to use their clout for doing good things. But that's another story....

"I've got a problem," Michaelmas said one dark-of-the-morning from his side of the bed.

"You can't prove it by me," Apricot said comfortably from her side of the bed. "You're great, and you know it."

"I said, I've got a problem. I didn't say it was *my* problem." He drew the sheet down away from her breast because he liked looking at it in the soft light. It wasn't curiosity because this breast was a good friend of his. And it wasn't lust because—for the moment—he'd happily used that up. He just liked it. "It's Square Adam's problem, but that makes it mine. He's my export manager; one of the best men I've got—*was*," he added.

Apricot was looking at the nipple too. One of the nicest things

about Apricot was how openly she liked what she had. "Square Adam?"

"His name is Adam Adams—Adams *squared*, get it? It's a sort of 'in' joke around the office because he's, honest to Pete, about as square as they come! Anyway, we call him Square Adam. But he isn't worth a damn right now. He mopes. He forgets. He looks you right in the eye and doesn't hear you; so you have to say whatever it is all over. He's even biting his fingernails."

"Woman trouble," Apricot nodded.

"Wife trouble."

"How'd you find that out?"

"Nothing to it! All I had to do was lock my office door, swear I wouldn't let him out until he told me what the trouble was, talk to him steadily for ninety minutes and feed him three double martinis—and he's not a drinking man. No trouble."

He leaned over and gently kissed the nipple, which responded. "I guess I leaned on him a bit. Well, hell! I'm a financier, not a shrink. And I don't know how to do this kind of thing, except to keep on driving until I find what's wrong."

"Not all that many shrinks know that trick," said Apricot, uncovering the other breast and nodding at it. They had a game they played, something about never getting lopsided. "So what's wrong?"

Michaelmas took care of the other nipple and sighed. "Monday nights. *Thursday* nights. Always in the dark! Always in the same bed—hers."

"You don't mean *twin* beds?"

"I do mean twin beds. He comes. She comes."

"*She* comes?!" Apricot said. "Okay, then what?"

"He washes."

"He washes. What does she do?"

"She cries. He goes back to his bed and goes to sleep."

Apricot turned to rest on one elbow, facing him. The low light came through her hair. This hair of hers was the color of apricots, all of it; her eyes, almost. He wondered which came first, her coloring or her name.

"All he has to do, Mr. Mike—"

"Little Ape, excuse me but I know all he has to do. He has to make it with her in the morning, on the floor, in the kitchen, end-to-end, with mouth, teeth and eyebrows all over. He doesn't

know how. He doesn't know *her*. She was brought up to believe (I'm quoting a famous psychiatrist) that 'sex is dirty, ugly, and disgusting, and you got to save it for your husband.' So was he, really. They were both virgins when they married."

"He could read a book..."

"He did read a book. His daddy gave it to him the week before the wedding. It was called *The Marriage Bed*. It was published in 1918. That's where he got the Monday-and-Thursday bit."

"And washing."

"No, his mother told him that. Anyway, if he tried that super-jock number on her now, he'd drive her even farther away from him than she already is.

"Ape ... look ... we can't put these kids down. They're good people. He is the best piece of manpower I found in years, and she's a pretty little thing—cute and bright. She treats him now as something between a stranger and an enemy, and it gets worse every day. They still do their thing on Mondays and Thursdays, and they both hate it, and it's driving Adam out of his gourd."

Being a woman, Apricot asked, "Didn't he ever ask her why she cries?"

"Once. Two weeks ago. And she said, 'I didn't want to come!' Then she cried all night."

Surprisingly, Apricot said, "That's a helpful sign," she lay for a while, musing. Michaelmas stayed quiet, watching her. He did like watching her. "And she won't go out and get laid? Guess not. That would destroy Adam. And her too, probably. H-m-m ..." A moment later she sat up briskly. "I'll call O'Toole!"

With "I *knew* you'd think of something!" Michaelmas said happily. "Who's O'Toole?"

"I'll tell you," she said, "but not now. You've done something to my nipples, and they're downright noisy."

"Oh," Michaelmas said, "I can fix that." And surprisingly, he ducked under the covers. Apricot wasn't able to see his hand snake down the side of the bed and snatch something up from the refreshment tray on the floor. He feather-fingered the insides of her thighs until they parted, and he began to gently massage the burnished thicket where they joined.

"M-m-m ..." she crooned, and lay back, completely relaxed.

Turning his palm upward, he stroked the warm cleft over and over, gently, gently—until it too parted, and he felt the swelling,

the beginning of the wetness, the easy smoothness of her arousal. Now it was easy to slip the end of his middle finger inside, to widen the aperture, to penetrate deeper ... gently, gently ... and to move out a little, in a lot, out a little, in a lot.... Apricot sighed.

He hooked his finger upward and, more gently than ever, found that magic spot behind the pubic bone, the one that even Masters and Johnson didn't mention in their book. He rested the pad of his finger on it while he brought his mouth close; then all at once he withdrew the finger, placed his lips on the quivering opening and shot into her waiting vagina the ice cube he had palmed out of the silver champagne bucket on the floor.

Apricot screamed, but by the time she could draw another full breath, his tongue was generating vibratory shocks on her clitoris. She screamed again, this time a totally different kind of scream, and came with a spastic orgasm the likes of which even Michaelmas, who was very active these days, had never imagined or even hoped for. His revived, old organ was just as pleased and astonished as Apricot was—and ready. He lost no time in rearing up and plunging it into her. Oh, yes, it was cold in there—but not for long. They came together, thunderously, and for a moment lay linked, somewhere near oblivion.

When they could breathe again, which took a while, she laughed. “You devil! You’ve been reading books.”

“Not really,” Michaelmas said. “Just thinking a lot, making plans....” He never knew if she was about to tell him who O’Toole was, because he suddenly fell asleep.

O’Toole was tall and wide, and had a muted voice that reminded Michaelmas of a fine brass wire brush wrapped in silk. He wore hundreds of dollars’ worth of gabardine and low boots, and his beautifully manicured hands were as competent as a bench vise. When he was introduced to Adam’s wife, Prue, he looked at her twice, as if he couldn’t believe his eyes. Michaelmas saw that she noticed and had colored, lightly, and that her husband had not noticed.

They trooped downstairs to a ground-floor restaurant that served everything Michaelmas liked (he owned it). O’Toole sat beside him, across from the Adamses. They were a handsome, unhappy couple: Adam the very picture of the young executive

on the rise; and Prue ... ah, Prue, flawless ivory skin, compact figure with tiny wrists, huge blue eyes and a helmet of blue-black hair falling away to a dark cape over her shoulders. She looked as if she had been taken out of a box, and the cellophane crackled away.

Cocktails and lunch passed pleasantly. O'Toole, obviously well briefed, said business things to Adam and Michaelmas, and gentle social things to Prue from time to time. Over the coffee, Michaelmas asked Prue if she could spare her husband the next day, a Wednesday; he wouldn't be back until Thursday at noon, and then he'd have to come straight to the office.

"I don't mind," she said, and she didn't.

"I was so sure you would say yes that I had Adam booked for a 9 AM flight tomorrow. Can you handle it, Adam?"

"Anything you say, Mr. Michaelmas."

"Good. Sue Benson will have the tickets and car and hotel reservations on desk before four o'clock. I want you to go to Abingdon, to a firm called Fleming Educational. Mr. Fleming himself will see you. And I'd like you to take a careful look at everything he'll want to show you, and come back on Thursday and give me your opinion about acquiring the company."

"Thursday," said Adam agreeably.

They parted politely, O'Toole and Prue going their separate ways, Michaelmas and Adam sharing an elevator. With an immense effort of will Michaelmas waited until he was alone in the office before he let himself chuckle and rub his hands in glee at the way Prue tried so hard all during lunch not to look at O'Toole. And her flicker of a smile every time he said anything amusing, or maybe "Pass the salt, please." *Hooked*, thought Michaelmas, happily. *Or anyway, following the bait with her mouth wide open.*

Friday morning Michaelmas stirred in the big bed in the large bedroom behind the private office and opened his eyes. Apricot was on her elbows, smiling at him.

"Well, good morning!" she said. "Really knocked yourself out, didn't you? I no sooner got here, all eager to tell you all about it, when you suddenly had my mouth full. What turned you so way on?"

Michaelmas laughed and yawned at the same time. "Thinking

about the doin's at the Adams residence, I guess. I talked to Fleming yesterday."

"And I talked to O'Toole."

"Really sump'n, ain't he? Are you going to tell me what his trick is? That's all you'd say, 'He has this trick he does.'"

Apricot laughed. "No, I won't. He will. I made so bold as to ask Sue to call him and get him over here this morning."

"What I get for trusting you," he said with mock grumpiness. "Suspense, that's what."

"Well, tell me all about Fleming Educational."

Michaelmas laughed. "It was educational, all right. Square Adam was gulping like a goldfish when he came in after lunch. He typed up a list of the first films Fleming showed him. I saved it for you.

Here."

She read aloud: "*Dancing With and Embracing Husband While Fully Clothed*. What is this?"

"Read on."

"*Being Kissed on Cheeks and Forehead. Being Kissed on Lips. Sitting on Husband's Lap, Both Fully Dressed. Why the hussy! Husband Kisses Neck and Ears. Husband Caresses Neck and Ears. Husband Caresses Neck and Face*. Raunchy stuff, this, Mr. Mike. Good thing they're married."

"Go on, Apricot."

"*Having Coitus in the Nude in a Living or Dining Room*. Well, it's about time. *Changing Positions During Intercourse. Having Intercourse With Husband in the Nude While Sitting on Husband's Lap*. Very advanced, that."

Laughing, Michaelmas took the paper and dropped it on the floor. " 'There were no stories or anything,' Adam says to me. He looked anxious, like a little kid who had to go to the bathroom. 'Just those titles and then little movies showing all those things. Showing, I mean, everything,' he says. 'There were a lot more,' he says. 'I'll bring over the rest of the notes after I've typed them. I wouldn't want my secretary to do it,' he says. 'Mr. Michaelmas, I thought I was going to see *educational* material.' " Michaelmas had to wait until Apricot's peal of laughter rang down. " 'Mr. Michaelmas,' he says, more anxious than ever, 'what kind of people need this kind of education?' I had some kind of choking fit.

“He told me there were lots more films, men and women, men and men, people tied up, two women and a man, two men and a woman. He said Fleming just sat there as if nothing unusual was happening. He said he guessed a person could get hardened to that kind of thing.”

“That part’s not all bad,” Apricot said, and fell back, putting the pillow over her face so she could shriek.

“But you know,” Michaelmas said, “Fleming told me that Adam put on a stoneface and never twitched all day. He must have been blown away but never showed it.”

“What kind of place is it you sent that poor lamb to?”

“Oh, it’s for real. Shrinks use those films in therapy, for people with various behavior problems. I bet he recommends that we not involve the firm in that kind of thing. Wonder what he’ll think when he finds out I already own it ... but tell me what happened with O’Toole.”

“Oh, yes!” Apricot sprang up and went into a lotus position in the middle of the huge bed. Beautiful. “Well, he called her about ten in the morning, when they could both be sure Square Adam was airborne. Invited her to lunch. She twittered a bit and tried to make up some appointments or something to cop out with. But she didn’t try very hard, and he just had to breathe into the phone until she persuaded herself. I bet it took her about twelve minutes to get dressed and ready; then she had an hour to wait. He called for her, and they had a lo-o-ong lunch, and talked to her in—that voice....”

“Yeah, that voice,” Michaelmas said. “Makes me feel like Mickey Mouse.”

“Yes, well, they went and sat on the grass in the park, and up to then he was what’s called a perfect gentleman. And then he asked her if she had ever been seduced. He said that she gasped as if he’d thrown a handful of crushed ice on her midriff. He said *he’d* never seduced anybody, ‘so let’s pretend that’s what we’re doing. Only, of course we won’t do it.’ ”

“Hey, wow!”

“So they agreed not to start until she went home and changed, and the perfect gentleman waited in the living room while she changed from pretty to beautiful. This time it took hours.”

“A masterstroke.”

“So out they went. They cocktailed at one place and dined

someplace else. And all the while he was doing the seducing bit—just practicing, you know, he kept telling her; he kept asking her, ‘Do you think I did that part right?’

“Then he began to tell her all the things he would do when at last they were alone. It began with—” she giggled, “caressing the neck and hair, fully clothed. And they danced—the guy dances like flying, Mr. Mike—and by then it was running his hands over her smooth back while he nibbled at her earlobes—still all talk, you understand—and at the last bar, ‘long about two in the morning, he ordered her a Hawaiian Sunset—”

“A what?”

“Hawaiian Sunset. One third scotch, one third rum, one third peach brandy. Apricot’s better,” she added.

“Oh, I’ll have the apricot,” he said gallantly.

“No, you won’t. I like you horizontal, Mr. Mike, but only when you can move. No kidding, it’s so sweet and so smooth, you don’t even know it’s alcohol until it’s too late. By the time she’d sipped half of it, he was talking about ‘plunging my throbbing manhood right up to your heart,’ and she was rolling up her eyes and till they were mostly whites and breathing hard. Upstairs—it was naturally a hotel bar—then, to the room he hired that morning. He asked her once more for her assurance that he was doing it all right, the game, and he said she was playing it just fine too. Once in the room, he told her he was going to go into the bathroom and strip naked, and that she should strip naked too and get under the covers. And when he came padding out and whispered her name, she was to throw the covers off and there she would be....

“So he strips naked and says, in that voice, ‘Now?’ And she murmurs, ‘Now ...’ And he tiptoes across the room with this enormous erection ahead of him like a bowsprit, and he says, ‘Prue? Li’l Prue?’ And she flings back the covers, and then he does his trick.”

There was the kind of this disoriented silence that happens for the first three seconds after a videotape breaks.

“What trick?!” Michaelmas asked.

“I told you. O’Toole has a trick he does. He did his trick, and then they got dressed, and he took her home, and that’s all.”

“Dammit, woman!” Michaelmas roared in his old skinflint, miser, robber baron manner, “What the hell happened?”

“Mr. Mike, dear, I love you altogether, but I wouldn’t spoil what comes next for anything in the world. Even you.”

There was a moment’s tense silence. Then a cultivated female voice spoke from a corporate walnut speaker grille: “Mr. Michaelmas, there’s a Mr. O’Toole here to see you.”

Apricot held up five fingers. “Give me five minutes,” Michaelmas called.

“Only five?” The voice clicked off.

Apricot laughed. “Oh, that O’Toole....” She bounded out of bed and began to skin into a very formfitting silver jumpsuit. A little less gracefully and slightly irritated, Michaelmas fumbled into slacks and a T-shirt and scuffs. Apricot led the way—danced the way—into the adjoining office. Her eyes sparkled. She waved toward the desk intercom. Michaelmas threw the key and said, “I’ll see Mr. O’Toole now.”

“Will you ever,” Apricot murmured.

The tall doors swung open, and O’Toole strode in wearing a thin chamois jacket and matched wool turtleneck, dark-brown slacks and huaraches. He looked very refreshed. “Morning, Apricot ... Mr. Michaelmas,” he rumbled.

“O’Toole,” said Apricot gaily, “we can talk about coffee and the weather and how you are later, if you don’t mind. But I’ve just told Mr. Michaelmas everything that happened with you and Prue Adams, up to but not including the moment you did your trick. And he can’t wait to know the rest of it, and I can’t wait either.”

“Oh—okay.” Quite unselfconsciously, he unzipped the dark-brown slacks.

“Wait!” Apricot cried. She whirled to the cabinet behind the desk and took out a Styrofoam cup. “Would you mind?”

“Not at all.” O’Toole hooked one iron thumb into the intricate back of a heavy, straight chair and slung it out to the middle of the room. He straddled it in such a way that the corner of the seat was centered under his crotch. From his open fly he produced the kind of dong that makes a fair percentage of other men feel that what they have is ding. On a small triangular platform formed by the corner of the chair, Apricot carefully placed the Styrofoam cup and stood back.

Michaelmas seemed about to speak, when Apricot said, “Sh-h-h. Watch.”

With no observable effort on O’Toole’s part, his dangling organ

snapped erect with such speed and force that the cup was belted halfway across the room, whizzing past Michaelmas's ear.

"Now that," breathed Michaelmas in an awestruck voice, "that is really a trick. So ... what did you do Wednesday night—bombard that poor lady with plastic cups?"

Apricot was still applauding. "O'Toole, thank you. Mr. Mike, that was *not* his trick ... his *other* trick. O'Toole, I told everything up to your using the trick. Now I'd like to show Mr. Michaelmas exactly how it all happened.

"I'll be Prue Adams. I'm naked. I'm lying in the bed—" She hopped up on the huge desk and lay down.

"I'm covered with a blanket. You call out from the bathroom, 'Ready?' And I say, 'Ready.' You're naked with that nice hard-on. You come across the room, stop by the bed and call my name. I open my eyes and see that wonderful tool reaching out for me. I throw the blanket off—you'll have to imagine there's a blanket—and you do your trick. Got it?"

"Got it," said O'Toole. He extricated himself from the chair. Even from where he sat, Michael could see the coral tip of that weapon of O'Toole's pulsing; and it couldn't have been more stiff if it had been splinted with a rat-tail file.

Apricot lay still on the desk with her eyes open.

O'Toole called out softly, a sound like a low B-flat on the French horn: "Ready?"

"Ready," she half whispered totally, and closed her eyes.

O'Toole tiptoed across to her, preceded by the bowsprit. "Ape—I mean, Prue. Little Prue ..."

Apricot opened her eyes, which fixed on the looming torpedo. Her eyes grew even larger, and she made a wide gesture with her arm, sweeping away the imaginary blanket.

Now, there is a sound that can only be written *ecch*, but which is pronounced in the back of the throat—like the sound some people make immediately before they spit, but softer.

Pretend-naked O'Toole looked down on pretend-naked pretend-Prue, his absolutely no-pretense-about-it erection hanging over her, and made that strange sound—*ecch*....

And the bone-stiff, pulsing kidney-wiper collapsed, a good deal faster than a tire goes flat (but quieter). At the same time O'Toole's expressive face acquired an expression of terminal boredom, as he turned his aristocratic profile aside, his eyes

upward and away from the supine form before him. In a voice suddenly cold, suddenly harsh, he said, "Get your clothes on. I'll take you home."

Apricot rolled up to sit on the edge of the desk, beaming. "How about that? That's his trick."

Michaelmas had not quite finished getting his breath back. "O'Toole," he said finally, "how do you do that?"

"I dunno, Mr. Michaelmas. It's just something I do. Always could. Hormones or something. I just don't know," O'Toole said, putting his equipment away.

Michaelmas went round the desk for his checkbook and wrote. He tore off a check and handed it to O'Toole. "That's what we agreed on?"

"No," said O'Toole. "It's twice as much."

"Worth it," Michaelmas said.

As O'Toole started away, Apricot said, "Go talk to Sue Benson. I bet she's holding her breath waiting for you to go through those doors."

O'Toole paused. "You want me to—"

"Beat it." Michaelmas smiled. "That one's on you." When O'Toole had gone, he turned to Apricot, who was swinging her feet, all but purring. "Ape, did you write that script?"

She nodded. "Mm-hm."

"Sometimes," Michaelmas said, "you scare me."

Later, alone in his office, Michaelmas sent for Square Adam. The young executive bounded in. His eyes sparkled, he crackled with energy, and when he walked up and down, which he did almost every time he said anything, Michaelmas thought he was going to skip. "Well! You're looking chipper today."

"I finished typing in the notes," Adams said, putting them on the desk.

"Fine. How're things, Adam?"

"Oh, good. Wonderful. I mean, great!" He moved close and put his hands on the desk. "Mr. Michaelmas—do you understand women?"

"No."

"Well, the most unbelievable thing happened last night, Thursday night, you know. That's when we ... gee, I feel kind of funny talking about it—it's kind of private, you know."

Michaelmas rose from his chair and came around to put a fatherly hand on the younger man's shoulder. "You don't think I'd misuse anything you told me behind closed doors, do you?" Which is the kind of thing you learned if you were ever a skinflint. The other guy always thinks you've made a promise.

"Oh, gosh, no!" Adam said. "After we talked the other day and all." And he actually blushed. "What happened last night, I was coming to bed—*her* bed, you know—and the first thing she did was tell me not to put out the light. That never happened before. And all of a sudden she threw back the bedclothes and lay there on the sheet. And she, well, she didn't even have her nightgown on! She was half crying and said, 'Adam, am I ugly? Am I awful? Do I turn you off?'

"And I said, 'Prue, this—you—you're the most beautiful thing I've ever seen.' And she cried out and put up her arms ... and we, well, you know, and it was just wonderful. And, and ... that isn't all. Afterward she wouldn't let me go. Not even to, you know, wash. I stayed in her bed all night long. I never did that before! And it was wonderful. I really do not understand women." He made a little laugh, started out, stopped, turned. "Mr. Michaelmas?"

"Yes, Adam."

"Do you suppose I could order some of those, uh, educational movies?"

"All you want, son. And better." Michaelmas smiled.

Grizzly

Sometimes you look at 'em once and you just don't believe your eyes and you have to turn your head away and think it over for a split second before you look again to check out why you are kidding yourself; nobody can look as beautiful as that, not in real life. And when you look again, you find out she really does.

I think if you had to find a single word for her, it might be 'supple,' but, you see, one word wouldn't do. The way she carried herself, that shining hair, that half smile, sort of a 'come on, it's all right' sort of smile, directed and announced to the whole world. The sun was on her as she came down the steps of the Women's Medical Clinic on Balboa Avenue. I'd been climbing up, but the sight of her stopped me stupid, standing there goggling with my mouth open. And her smile widened a little, as if she liked what she saw and she said "Hi."

I have my own personal cargo of shy, and this isn't my style at all, but I heard myself saying, "You want coffee, right?"

"Tea," she said. You watch someone playing cello, if they bow right up near the bridge in the middle-low register, it makes a sound like her voice.

I said a little tiny 'oh' and then a real sharp "Oh!" and I could feel my eyes open so wide they bulged. "Well," I said, and, "Well, then." And, "There's a place over on mumble mumble."

"Oh good."

So there we were in this coffee shop, where she settled into a booth like thistle-down when the wind dies. Her name, she said, was Griselda—"Grizzly." I'd said, wittily, "I can't bear it," and then she'd said, "A lot of people say that, sooner or later," and coming from anyone else, that would be puncture, but not the way she did it, so pleasant. And from the time the coffee (and tea) were ordered until the time they arrived, I didn't try to say a word, I just looked. She took it gracefully, with another kind of smile which said openly, "Go ahead—it's all right." "Graceful"—that's another one-word description, but it doesn't cover the shining teeth peeping out from under their pink-silk coverlet, not

that soft shadowed cave between the fall of her hair and her neck when she tipped her head to one side. Then she said, “Do you have herpes?”

I said “h-h-h- ...” and then had to stop and swallow. I told myself for a lot of years that I was unshockable, but guess what. When I got my breath back I said, “No I don’t, and I don’t have Down syndrome or neurodermatitis or—or Twonk’s Disease or even AIDS.”

“That’s too bad,” she said—she said regretfully!—and then reached quickly to touch the back of my hand (it was the first touch between us, and it raced through my entire endocrine system) and she made a small laugh. “I don’t really mean herpes; that’s at a standstill right now, although there might be a real breakthrough soon, what with oral acyclovir and that detergent cell they’re looking at now. No—AIDS is what I’m after at the moment. Of course,” she added, and touched my wrist again, only enough to make my nostrils flare, “I’d want to get it from someone I liked. What’s Twonk’s Disease?”

I tried to come out of shock into anger—I really tried, but dammit, I had to look at her while I did that, and I couldn’t look at that face, that hair, and feel anything but wonder. “You’ve got a funny way,” I said oafishly, “of being funny.” And then the anger poked its little head up again. “Is that a cute way of finding out if I’m gay?”

She made a half shake of her head. Impatience. “Don’t fall for that Moral Majority ploy, that you have to make it with a homosexual Haitian drug addict to get AIDS. The first researchers found it there, sure, and it was a godsend to Sister Schlafly, who could then imply that God sent it to punish the sins of gays for they did with each other, for snowbirds for what they did to themselves, for Haitians for being black and for anyone who might be an undocumented alien. Once the doctors got into some real research, they found out that most anybody can get acquired immunodeficiency syndrome from anyone who has it. Ask the doctors at Montefiore Medical if you don’t believe me.”

I’d’ve believed anything she told me, but I was afraid to say so yet. I hadn’t been ready for that cascade of information and opinion either. I said, “Why are you so interested in AIDS, anyway?”

“I think I told you. I want to catch it.”

My coffee was getting cold. I wasn't. "You? *You?*" It came out like a holy word. "That would be terrible! Just, well, *terrible!* Why on earth would you want to do a thing like that?"

"Because I'd make an ideal research subject. And they could research me for months—years, on that one."

I felt a great warm rush of something which completely bypassed the ductless glands. It was admiration. "You are a wonderful, wonderful person." I think I had tears in my eyes. "You care that much about other people, people you don't even know, that you'd risk your life to help find a cure." I wanted to belly across the table and hug her but real reverence tied me down. "You are a saint."

"I wish I could pin that medal on," she said, and took both my hands. "Just to have you looking at me like that. Nobody ever looked at me like that before." Her eyes were extraordinarily bright. We sat that way for a half minute or a week, I forgot which, and then she took her hands away, and said: "Do I have to tell you how hard it is to get a job these days—any job, let alone a good clean one where you know where the next meal and the next change of linen is coming from? And people around you who really care?"

"What's that got to do with it?"

"I know a man who has diffuse interstitial pneumonitis. It's slowly turning those little spongy cells and his lungs into fibroid tissue. Nobody knows what causes it. There's a team of doctors at UCSD Medical Center who want to find out. He's lost thirty-five percent of his lung capacity already. It will surely kill him."

"Rough, but what's that got to do with—"

She went right on, "If it continues at the rate it's going he'll be dead of it in the next forty years."

"I still don't see what that's got to do with—" and then I absorbed what she just said. "Forty years?—how old is he?"

"Fifty-five. He isn't scared."

"Ah, but with thirty-five percent of his lungs gone—"

"A man can have a whole lung taken out and live a long and active life," she informed me. "Matter of fact, you can move around pretty well with eleven-twelfths of your lungs gone, did you know that?"

"I didn't know that."

"So they gave him a room at the Center. Meals. Bedding. His

own bathroom. Money—not much, but enough for a man who has all of those other things paid for, and no taxes. And all he has to do is to go through lung performance tests once in a while, and hold still for some pictures.”

“X-rays?”

“Oh my no. Not anymore. When they installed the NMR system from Schenectady, those electronic wizards fell in love with those lungs of his. So now there’s a whole ‘nother team keeping him for observation. He’s set for life, or as long as he wants to be there.”

“What’s the—what?—NMR?”

“Nuclear magnetic resonance, but don’t bother your pretty little head about it,” she said, but oh! so kindly. “It’s a way of taking diagnostic pictures of living tissues without invading them, watching chemical reactions, watching fibroid tissue taking over a lung, just for example. Very new, very fancy, and my friend is very much in demand for calibrating the thing. Nine times a day, if they want it and no more X-rays.”

“But that’s like being in the state pen!”

“Oh no! Not one bit! He comes and goes except when he has his dates with the doctors, and that’s only once in a while.”

“I think you’ve changed the subject, Grizzly.”

“No I haven’t.... Do you know what I really want?” She asked suddenly, touching my hands again. (Did you ever hear someone play a scale on the tympanum? That’s what went on in my solar plexus every time she touched me, only nobody could hear it but me.)

“If it’s something I can give you, or do,” I said, my imagination getting noisy. “I hope I can.”

“So I,” she said. “A sandwich. And more tea.”

I could do that, and disappointedly, I did. “You’re saying that your friend has turned his minus into a plus.”

“Oh yes. Plus the skill.”

“What skill?”

“Why he plays that Medical Center like a piano. If he wants some extra little goodie, a bigger TV or an extra dollar, he mentions it around. Then a couple of days later he’ll start yearning to go back East or get a job in San Francisco or some such. It’s never very long before someone bribes him to stay, with whatever it is he wants. And he always keeps it reasonable.”

“I’m slowly beginning to understand why you ... but Grizzly:

AIDS? Grizzly, half the people who get that, die!”

“I don’t know if it’s half,” she said thoughtfully. “Some say forty percent, some say eighty. What’s Twonk’s Disease?”

“But you’re so beautiful, Grizzly! And so bright! Surely you could get a job, a good job, something you’d really like.”

She leaned forward. I could smell her. She used no perfume. She smelled good. She said soberly, “Bright. I graduated from high school when I was sixteen. I couldn’t look at colleges since Old Charisma raised tuitions and lowered the loans. I sold sandwiches at the front end of the Kmart on 54th Street and saved my pennies to buy a computer course because everybody said programmers and processors were the crest of a beautiful wave. As soon as I graduated from that I got my job, bang like that, just like everybody said.” She took a healthy bite of her bacon-and-cheese on whole-wheat bun. I’ve never known anyone who could articulate so freely with half a mouthful of food. The cello was muted but the music played on. “It was a long room with fifteen word processors clicking away. It took me about forty minutes to understand that nobody there would talk more than a grunt or three words, and that without a boss in sight. Just that chuckety-check from the fifteen keyboards. Lunchtime was a buzzer, lunch was over after a five-minute warning honk and another buzzer, quitting time was a honk. And you better be there. On the second day the manager came out of an upstairs somewhere and told me I was twelve minutes behind my diary. My diary was a mainframe console in his office. He could key in any one of the fifteen processors and his computer would display work performed versus work assigned. Which is why nobody ever leaned back even for a minute to say something to somebody. I stayed in that sweatshop until I had earned my unemployment and got myself immediately fired.”

She drank tea. “I did all the right things, wrote resumes, made the rounds, stood in lines, waited in personnel departments. There were jobs. Making submarine sandwiches in the front end of chain stores. Sweatshops. Door-to-door sales. (That’s raperville.) I said no either to the job or to the gropes that came with them or both.”

“In between times I did what I really liked, the libraries, museums, parks, the San Diego zoo. I met the fibrosis case at the zoo. He bought me a sack of animal food and we got to talking,

and that's how I found out about how he made his living. He's a nice man.

"I thought about it a lot. One thing I thought about was syphilis, but that's only good for two or three days and once next week. I thought about unwed mothering. You can get taken in and cared for, living with thirteen-year-old incest veterans, runaways and hookers, for clothes, a bed, make-work and a little money, but it's only good for eight months maximum and then you have some difficult decisions to make and repeats of all that did not inspire me.

"But it was Mr. Fibrosis that tipped me off to the medical underground. There is a whole army of patient, skilled research subjects well-fed and happy all over this town. There's a man living very comfortably in the clinic of the La Jolla Medical Clinic on Genesee Avenue with incurable ulcers on his leg. They'll be incurable as long as his girlfriend keeps inoculating the ulcers when they begin to heal. She's from the West Indies and has what they call down there an 'oldsore.' The fact that he's the only Caucasian ever known to have a genuine oldsore makes him eligible. Okay: he's a fake and Mr. Fibrosis is not, but if the fake, or any other fake makes the medics come up with a cure for oldsore or anything else, he might just end a lot of misery somewhere in the world. So he might as well live easy while he does it.

"You can't just walk into a hospital or research center and get a spot like that without knowing what you're doing. Research and medical scientists aren't stupid, and they have some humongous tools to work with. You have to read everything you can reach, up and down the whole field of what they call 'the healing arts.' " She paused to pour hot water thoughtfully on her tea bag. "You have to use your imagination and a lot of tact. Finding something obscure isn't enough; some old codger who used to be a country doctor is likely to swab your trouble with boric acid and cure it on the spot. Or some pink-cheeked kid who got his MD last June might connect you to a black box you've never heard of, and it lights up and shows you up for a fake, if you are one. It has to be something interesting and challenging, and maybe threatening if it gets out of hand, like herpes or AIDS; and most of all, they must never suspect that you want something from them; they have to want something from you. And you can't just agree; you

have to be persuaded. Are you married or anything?"

I came to with a start, my mind swirling with oldsores and research, the wonder of her soft yet muscular lips and shy swift tongue as she spoke. "Not even anything."

"There's lots of them in the mental hospitals. It's easy enough to make that scene; all you have to do is go there and sign yourself in. But you'd better know what you're doing. Some places are not snake pits at all, but to walk that fine wire of being an outpatient inpatient, you better have something interesting or you'll have a thin part of a funnel in your face with the drug factory at the other end. Mr. Fibrosis told me of a man who was a genius with mental hospitals. He would walk in and start talking to the admitting doctor in a quiet cultivated voice, talking absolute logic. Mr. Fibrosis says if you anchor one end of a logical chain in truth, and break no links, you can put the other end anywhere you want. He persuaded one of the doctors to believe that since some chemicals used in injections were derived from the organs of pigs, he ran a real risk of turning into a pig if he was injected. He was so persuasive that he got a room of his own, not locked or padded, for seven months. Then he moved on to another hospital away from San Diego but still in the Sunbelt. What is Twonk's Disease?"

That brought me back to earlier words. "Not AIDS. Please, Grizzly; not that, not you."

"You have something better?"

"But that's so ... so ..."

"Darling—" (My God; did she call me that?) "Don't worry. The big danger of AIDS is not AIDS. All AIDS does is depress the immune system so that something else can get in and take over—viruses, bacteria, fungi, yeast, and you die of the flu or meningitis or something stupid like mono. But you see, darling—(again!)—if I'm a research subject with AIDS, in a really good hospital like Scripps, there just won't be anything else getting in and taking over. They'll take care of that, right down to filtered air and forks and spoons taken out of an autoclave with surgical gloves. I'll be all right."

I shook my head very slowly and said "Balboa Park. Black's Beach. The libraries. And Grizzly; the Zoo. Are you going to sit there in a sterile bubble away from anyone who coughs, or sneezes or—" my tone dropped to that which Thorne Smith

described as “a voice as low as his intentions.” “—puts his arms around you, Grizzly, holds you close ...?”

“Are ... are you crying?”

“Of course not,” I said hoarsely, swabbing my eyes with my napkin. For the first time, I couldn’t look at her. When at last I did, she was looking at me out of a face full of tenderness. Her head was tipped a little in that way of hers, and I had the mad urge to plunge my whole self into that cave of warm flesh and sheltering hair, in and in and altogether in.

“There was another reason I stopped on the Women’s Clinic steps when you spoke to me,” she said softly.

Oh Lord.

She said, “I was coming out. You were going in. Why were you going into the Clinic?”

“Oh, I was just—I mean, I—” I stalled.

She laughed suddenly, wind-chimes. “You’re *blushing!*”

“No I’m not,” I said out of a hot face.

“Why? Tell me.”

“Twonk’s Disease.”

“Come on ...”

“All right,” I said gravely, “I’ve got a wart on my stomach.” I got up. “Will you come home with me?” She didn’t say anything. She came home with me.

It was maybe three weeks later when I was reading *Not the Reader* sitting alone in the kitchen over my coffee, when Grizzly came in, dancing and shouting, “We did it! We did it!”

“Damn, you’ve been away a long time!”

“Listen to me! We—”

“Where did you go? Oh, right ... But what about the rash, your poor dear rash?”

“That’s it, that’s *it!*” She danced in a circle and suddenly rushed me, pulling my head down and between her breasts, and holding it there. She is very strong. I couldn’t say a word.

“Now that I have your attention,” she said quietly out of a deep pool of laughter, “you will be pleased to know that a dermatologist, an allergist, a biochemist and two graduate students earnestly request our presence at Vista Hill Hospital, where they have prepared a three-room suite, in which, for a suitable fee, we are asked to reside, sometimes apart, often

together, for research purposes, for an indefinite period.”

“Because of the rash?” I muffled.

She released me. “Because of the rash.”

“What is it? Twonk’s Disease?”

“No it isn’t. And they’re fascinated. There are only a few such cases in the records, and none of them has ever seen one before, and they want to know *everything* about it, no matter how long it takes!”

“What is it, then?”

“Darling—I’m *allergic to you!*”

“Grizzly—that’s awful!”

“No it isn’t. I don’t mind a rash. And they’ll cure it and induce it and cure it and induce it, until they’ve analyzed it down to the atom. What is Twonk’s Disease?”

It’s a mild old gag I carry around to use to break up dull conversations, or to wreck other people’s train of thought when I need time of my own. I put on my grave face and said, “Very serious. It’s a falling of the armpits.” And we both shouted and danced.

AFTERWORD

Theodore Sturgeon, Storyteller

Paul Williams

I

The best short story writer in America lives on a hill on the outskirts of Los Angeles. He works on TV scripts, gives lectures, teaches a class, writes book reviews and does introductions to other people's books. That's all. He's sold four new short stories in the last four years. Of the twenty-three books he's written in the course of his career, only three are still in print in the United States. His old masterpieces are not being read; and his new ones are not being written.

And he has no one to blame for this state of affairs but himself.

Theodore Sturgeon.

I'm twenty-eight years old (or will be when this is published) and the man I'm writing about is more than twice my age. And when I was just half this age, fourteen, it occurs to me now, I was at a party on the fourteenth floor of the Pick-Congress Hotel in Chicago at about five in the morning, the last night of my first science-fiction convention, and Judith Merrill, famed anthologist and author/editor of some of my favorite books, turned to me and asked—just about everyone but me had consumed a fair quantity of alcohol by this time—"Doesn't it bother you to see that your heroes have feet of clay?" And I said, "They couldn't be heroes if they didn't," or some such clever fourteen-year-old's remark. Then the sun came up over Lake Michigan while the drunk science fiction writers told stories and sang folk songs, and I was indeed filled with quiet awe—not at the great names made flesh around me, but at whatever miracles had brought me, at age fourteen, to this inner sanctum, this place of dreams.

Theodore Sturgeon was Guest of Honor at that particular science-fiction convention (Labor Day Weekend, 1962), and I shook his hand but didn't actually talk with him. He had his wife and his children with him, and was very much the center of attention wherever he went in the convention hall, and anyway I had nothing to say; I loved the man and I loved his stories and there was no way I could tell him that.

Fourteen years later I visit his home, we talk about anything and everything, I enjoy his hospitality and see his feet of clay—we've been friends of a sort for two or three years now—and each time I read a story of his he is again my favorite writer, a worker of miracles; but in between times he's just a friend, attractive and annoying and as blind as the rest of us.... To write this story I need a hero, because this is a story of great achievements. But even after months of careful research, the man slips away from me, he's too human—I know him and his life so well but I still can't understand where his miracles come from.

Sturgeon wrote, just to give you an example, the all-time great story about Senator Joseph McCarthy, who he was and how he did what he did. The story is called "Mr. Costello, Hero," and it starts out on a spaceship. This man Costello is a passenger on the ship—wonderful guy, everybody likes him. Except maybe the skipper, an uptight old coot who doesn't approve of the progressive influence Mr. Costello has had on his crew. Like they've started playing draw poker without the draw, because that way there's less opportunity for anyone to cheat. And volunteers stand watch in the galley, to make sure the cook isn't poisoning the food. True, it makes for a crowded kitchen, but Cooky doesn't mind—this way he knows everybody can trust him.

Costello gets off at a city on a frontier planet and manages to drive a wedge between the city-dwellers and the trappers who provide the fur that is the planet's chief export, by making people deathly afraid of anyone who likes to be alone. Pretty soon he's running the place. It's utterly terrifying and utterly believable, particularly because Sturgeon tells the story from the viewpoint of a guy (the ship's purser) who really likes Mr. Costello and doesn't see anything wrong in the way he does things.

It's a triumph of skilled storytelling—great characters,

absorbing narrative, hair-raising conclusion. But there's more to it than that. The story was written and published in 1953, at the height of the McCarthy era, and it is a devastating, thinly disguised attack on the man and his methods ... but more than that, it's a beautifully lucid presentation of exactly how a man like McCarthy can use fear and vanity and gullibility to divide people and set them against each other and put himself in power.

"Mr. Costello, Hero" is one of the finer pieces of writing to come out of the whole McCarthy experience, and it was written for a science-fiction magazine by a genre writer who had listened to the Army-McCarthy hearings on the radio and had once in his youth written speeches for a local politician in a Texas seaport, and that was the extent of his involvement in the world of politics.

How does Sturgeon do it? No two stories of his are alike, but of the 160 he's written in the last four decades, I count at least fifty major works, stories as beautiful and important as anything you might care to compare them with. And none of these stories is known to anyone but science fiction readers and Sturgeon fanatics; and forty-five of the fifty are not even in print in this country.

And Sturgeon sits in his house in Los Angeles, full of ideas, and stares at his typewriter, and doesn't write.

II

Theodore Sturgeon was born February 26th, 1918, on Staten Island in New York City. His name at birth was Edward Hamilton Waldo. "I was born a Waldo," Sturgeon told science fiction scholar David Hartwell in an unpublished 1972 interview, "and had kind of an interesting family. Peter Waldo was a dissident priest in the 12th century who got ahold of the dumb idea that perhaps the Pope at Rome ought to go back to the vows of poverty and obedience, get rid of the Swiss Guards and the jewel-encrusted cross, and put on a monk's habit and go out amongst the people. The Pope took a very dim view of that indeed, and they persecuted the Waldenses all across Europe for 200 years."

"That was the Waldensian Heresy, that you should go back to Apostolic Christianity. Nobody wanted to go and do a thing like that. And they settled in Flanders, and in England, and in 1640

two ships of them decided to go to the New World. They got separated by a storm, and one of them went to Connecticut; there are still Waldos in Connecticut to this day. The other ship went far south, and it wound up in, of all places, Haiti. Well, Haiti in 1640 was already a refuge for runaway slaves; and when they found they had a shipload of dissident priests, they welcomed them with open arms. Waldo became corrupted to Vaudois, which became Voodoo, which is the etymology of the word 'voodoo'.... There's been a whole line of gurus in my family: Ralph Waldo Emerson was one of them."

Edward Waldo's father, who was in the paint, oil and varnish business, left his mother when Edward was five. Five years later she remarried, and Edward (along with his older brother Peter) was adopted by his stepfather and his name was legally changed to Theodore Sturgeon. Sturgeon because that was the stepfather's name—he was a professor of modern languages at Drexel Institute in Philadelphia—and Theodore because Edward was the boy's father's name and the mother was still bitter and anyway young Edward had always been known as Teddy. (To this day, libraries all over the world list "Theodore Sturgeon" as a pseudonym for "E. H. Waldo," which is incorrect; Sturgeon is his real name.)

At the age of thirteen, Theodore became a star athlete. He'd had to do something. His stepfather had arranged for him to enter high school at the age of 11—he went from the fifth grade to the ninth grade with nothing in between but eight weeks of summer school—and naturally he was the smallest kid in the class. "I was pretty well brutalized by the whole thing. I had to figure out different ways to walk to school every day, because kids would lay for me on the way. I had curly golden hair and was very thin and kind of wheyfaced and—pretty. And I was just an absolute target."

"While I was in high school I discovered apparatus gymnastics, and that became my total preoccupation. In a year and a half I gained four inches and sixty pounds, and I became captain and manager of my gym team, which is literally a transfiguration. I was totally born again. The very kids that used to bully me would follow me around and carry my books. And then when I was fifteen, I came down with acute rheumatic fever."

"By this time I had a two-year scholarship already at Temple

University, an athletic scholarship; and my whole life was blueprinted. I was going to get my degree in physical education and spend a year teaching, and then I was going down to Florida and join the Barnum & Bailey Circus and become a flyer. However, acute rheumatic fever and six months flat on my back took care of that. My heart was so enlarged, it squirted up between my ribs where you could see it beating from outside. Inside of a year I had a fantastic recovery—but no more gymnastics, ever. It was a shattering experience.”

Sturgeon left high school a few weeks before graduating. He went to sea for three years. And then he became a writer.

III

Sturgeon's best-known work is a novel (actually three interconnected stories) called *More than Human*. It's about five children with unusual psychic powers who are able to “blesh” their talents together so that they become a single functioning organism, *homo gestalt*, the next step in human evolution. This novel contains some of the most memorable characters and extraordinary passages of writing (“The idiot lived in a black and gray world, punctuated by the white lightning of hunger and the flickering of fear. His clothes were old and many-windowed. Here peeped a shinbone, sharp as a cold chisel, and there in the torn coat were ribs like the fingers of a fist. He was tall and flat. His eyes were calm and his face was dead.”) in modern fiction. It won the International Fantasy Award in 1954, has sold over a half-million copies in paperback, and both directly and indirectly has had a huge impact on the ideas and values of several generations of young Americans.

When a friend of mine, in 1964, asked David Crosby about the new rock group he was performing in, he said, “We blesh.” Crosby, like most mid-Sixties' rock musicians (and underground press editors, political activists, dope impresarios, etc.), was an avid reader of science fiction in general and Sturgeon in particular; and he realized early that the Byrds and other rock groups were living examples of Sturgeon's idea that a group of humans could function as more than the sum of the individuals involved ... not just more, but mystically more, so that the group took on its own personality and created things that none of its

individual members could even have imagined. Chester Anderson wrote in the San Francisco *Oracle* in 1966, in a widely reprinted analysis of the new rock or “head” music, “Rock is evolving Sturgeonesque homo gestalt configurations...” The Merry Pranksters were another example of the same phenomenon, as were all the nameless groups that came together to organize political or cultural events and then disbanded and vanished when the work was done.

The “counterculture,” in retrospect, was heavily modeled on a handful of science-fiction and fantasy novels: *Childhood’s End*, *Dune*, *The Lord of the Rings*, *Stranger in a Strange Land* and *More than Human*. The ideas expressed in these books hit home for a lot of impressionable adolescents, who later tried hard to transform their yearnings into changed lifestyles and new realities.

And a new set of values. Sturgeon, in *More than Human* and throughout his work, is a moralist as well as a visionary. Not the kind of moralist who knows what’s right and what’s wrong and tells you in so many words, but the kind who is searching for the answers and shares his search with his readers. In *More than Human*, the problem faced by *homo gestalt* is, “Now that you’re superman, what do you do with your powers?” Sturgeon’s answer is awkward and incomplete, but, for our generation, much more appropriate than Nietzsche’s.

We have to live our lives, he says, constantly refining and acting out a definition of morality that goes beyond individual survival and even goes beyond survival of the social unit. He is reaching constantly for a higher sense of the human role on this planet, and in that he is very much in touch with his postwar readers.

Sturgeon has an ambivalent attitude towards his own work, his career, all that sort of thing. He wants success desperately, and avoids it like the plague. Late one night, puttering around the kitchen (it was probably 3 AM, and he was probably getting ready to feed the rabbits or wash the dishes), Ted told me he’s been hearing this voice inside him all his life which says, in response to whatever is or seems to be expected of him by the outside world, “I won’t do it.” Only recently, he said, he’s realized that there’s another half to the sentence, and what he’s really saying, deep in there somewhere, is, “I won’t do what they want me to do.”

And, God knows, he doesn't.

Sturgeon does not do what the world expects him to do. He resists mightily. He always has. When he was in high school there was a regulation that, when the weather got warm, if you came to school wearing a sweater you had to take it off. So Ted would show up at school wearing a sweater but no shirt.

"He has this need to do it backwards...." Betty Ballantine, Sturgeon's editor on a number of his best books, was talking about Sturgeon's approach to a novel or short story (like when he wrote a western in which the hero loses the girl, or portraying Mr. Costello via an admiring observer); but as soon as the words were out of her mouth we both realized it was a perfect description of Sturgeon's approach to everything in his life.

In his own funny way, Theodore Sturgeon is one of the contrariest people I've ever met. This makes him hard to work with and helps keep him away from success. But it's also a significant part of what makes his stories so special. Sturgeon consistently sees things as though he were looking from the other side.

He turns things around and inside out at the same time, without letting go of your hand. It's a neat trick if you can do it.

IV

Q: How did you get started as a writer?

A: "I was in the merchant marine, working on a coastwise tanker, and I worked out a way to rob the American Express Company of several hundred thousand dollars. I did my homework: I wrote to the company and found out precisely how they shipped this and that and the other thing, got it all worked out and then wrote it as a short story because I didn't have quite the guts to do it myself.

"And one magical day, when I was picking up my mail at the Seaman's Institute in New York, I got a letter that said I'd sold the story. I'd sold it to a newspaper syndicate, the McClure Syndicate, and I was so excited I quit my job, I went ashore and I was going to be a writer.

"Well, I sold the story for five dollars, payable on publication. It had taken me three months to research it. And they were willing to buy one story, sometimes two, a week. No more. So for

almost six months, I lived on five or ten dollars week. I lived on West 63rd Street, where Lincoln Center is now, and it cost me seven and a half dollars a week for the room; and I ate on whatever was left.”

So in 1938, at the age of 20, Theodore Sturgeon quit the merchant marine and became a full-time writer. He’d been at sea for three years, starting with six months on a school ship, the Penn State Nautical School, which was just like going back to the ninth grade and getting brutalized (new cadets were hazed mercilessly by upper-classmen) all over again. “I remember the first shit session I was in. One of the officers came up from aft, and started to walk forward, and walked right past this line. And I greeted him with—silently, of course, but I thought, ‘Oh thank God! Here comes an officer. This is going to stop.’ And I could not believe it when he walked right through without looking. We were getting brutalized and beat on and kids were passing out, it was just ghastly. And the guy did nothing to stop it; he smiled slightly and walked on. That was so bloody unfair—” Ted says this like it was yesterday; after forty years, you can still hear the anger in his voice.

“I could not bring myself to quit while this was going on. But the very minute I completed my first term, and was no longer on the bottom ...” He dropped out of nautical school, just like he’d dropped out of high school, and used his cadet credentials to get an Ordinary Seaman’s Ticket, and shipped out with a steamer outfit called the Merchant and Miners Transportation Company.

The short stories Sturgeon wrote for the newspaper syndicate, in his room on West 63rd Street, were not science fiction—they were human-interest vignettes, boy-meets-girl or sailing stories or whatever, but always with some kind of little clever twist that gave them their charm. Like the girl gets the guy by putting vanilla extract on her ear lobes, so every time he gets near her he thinks about cookies and yellow curtains in the kitchen.

Sturgeon wrote these stories, and other odd assignments when he could get them, and then one day when he’d walked over to Brooklyn to see his brother, or maybe late one night nursing a five-cent cup of coffee in Martin’s 57th Street Cafeteria, somebody showed him a copy of a new fantasy magazine called *Unknown*, and said, “Hey! This is what you ought to be writing for....” Sturgeon went to see John Campbell, the editor, who also

edited a magazine called *Astounding Science Fiction* and ended up selling him twenty-six stories in the next year and a half. It was 1939.

Science fiction was not a new discovery for Sturgeon. Like most of us, he started reading the stuff when he was twelve or thirteen. His stepfather—always the autocrat—took one look at Ted's copies of *Amazing* and *Astounding* and forbade him to bring those pulp magazines into the house. The Sturgeon family lived in a fourth-floor apartment, top of the building, and the closet in Ted's room had a hatch that led to a crawlspace under the roof. Ted took his magazines up there and dropped them behind the fourth rafter back, where they couldn't be seen even by somebody standing on a chair looking in with a flashlight. "So it's a mystery to me how that man was ever able to discover them...."

But he did. "One time I came home, and he says, 'There's a mess in your room. I want you to clean it up.' I walked in there, and that room was nearly ankle deep in tiny little pieces of paper no bigger than postage stamps. He had torn up my entire collection of science-fiction magazines. It must have taken him hours—I guess his hands must have ached for days. I can remember I was sobbing, just crying, sweeping up those little pieces of paper, and looking at one every once in a while, wondering what story that was. And I had to clean it all up. Which may well be why I'm a science fiction writer today."

Ted's brother went off to fight in the Spanish Civil War, and Ted stayed in New York, writing his stories. He married his high school sweetheart—her name was Dorothy, and she changed it to Dorothe so it would be the same as Theodore—and they had a baby girl, Patricia, and then Ted—who'd written his best-received story to date, a tale of eldritch horror called "It," in ten hours on his honeymoon, and then followed it with a little epic called "Microcosmic God," which made such an impact that decades later it was voted one of the top five sf stories of all time by the Science Fiction Writers of America—Ted turned his back on his growing reputation as a writer and got a job managing a hotel in Jamaica.

Sturgeon was twenty-two years old. He'd thought he could turn

out stories fast enough—at a penny a word—to support his new family, but it wasn't working out; in fact lately the stories had stopped coming altogether. This hotel gig would take care of immediate needs, and then maybe the change of scene would get his creative juices flowing again....

It didn't work out that way. In the next five years, Sturgeon wrote exactly one story, right in the middle of this period; the rest of the time, though he tried and tried, nothing happened. The war came, the hotel closed down—Sturgeon became a bulldozer driver, a heavy equipment operator (he was not a big man, but he was good with machines, and it was wartime)—they moved to Puerto Rico, and then St. Croix. A second daughter, Cynthia, was born. Eventually Ted quit his other jobs and just worked full time at trying to write—but apart from his classic short novel “Killdozer,” written in nine days in 1943, no stories came. He just didn't understand it. It was like something had broken inside him, and he couldn't put it together again.

V

“No living writer has quite Sturgeon's grasp on horror and hilarity, nor knows quite so many kinds of people so well.”—Groff Conklin

“Perhaps the best way I can tell you what I think of a Theodore Sturgeon story is to explain with what diligent interest, in the year 1940, I split every Sturgeon tale down the middle and fetched out its innards to see what made it function. I looked upon Sturgeon with a secret and gnawing jealousy.”—Ray Bradbury

“Theodore Sturgeon has made himself the finest conscious artist science fiction ever had.”—James Blish

“I think the corpus of Sturgeon's stories ranks with de Maupassant's. I think it is superior to O. Henry's, superior to Damon Runyon's, superior to Ring Lardner's, you know, the great short-story writers of ... I think it is superior to Hemingway's short stories (if you take the Hemingway novels, you may be into something else). I think one is

dealing with a writer of that stature. To the extent that the short story is an art, Sturgeon is the American short story writer. The fact that he happens to be writing in science fiction is a glorious accident.”—Samuel R. Delany

In pursuit of a hero.

It was his daughter Tandy—the fourth of Ted’s seven children—who gave me the word for what kind of a hero Theodore Sturgeon is. She said she’s had this vision, since she was a small child, of “a society that works”—maybe a small village—not a conscious model, but something she’s picked up from dreams, or by osmosis. “A place I know as the society that should be. And the storyteller is central to that society. He—Homer—is the cement that holds society together. They need to go and listen to him. Now people don’t ask. They’ve forgotten, they don’t have time to listen. But they still need it. And they like him because he makes them want to listen.”

Storyteller. That’s the word.

Tandy’s vision reminds me of a Sturgeon story called “The Touch of Your Hand.” It takes place in a small village, and there’s a wise old man who the people go and listen to—but he’s a musician—but the story’s about an angry young man, who wants to take these sleepy villagers and teach them to struggle and hate, so that they can build cities and glorious machines and become real men ... and about a beautiful young woman, who doesn’t understand, but who loves him and tries to help. Like most Sturgeon stories, it has powerful characters and some very surprising twists in the plot line. And the story, which manages to show at the same time much of what is ugliest and most beautiful about human beings, is also memorable for introducing one of Sturgeon’s most original and challenging ideas on the subject of how to improve human nature.

The same idea in a somewhat different form crops up in a later story, “The Skills of Xanadu.” (“Touch” is from 1953; “Xanadu” from 1956.) In both instances Sturgeon suggests that human beings, or creatures like them, will develop a form of telepathy within a social group (a village, a nation) which allows each person to automatically draw on the group’s collective reservoir of knowledge and acquired skills whenever he or she needs to know something. In other words, if you need to sew a buttonhole

and you don't know how, you just concentrate and the way to do it will come to you from someone who does know will come to your fingers, and you can just start to do it and feel how it should be and which motions are right.

"We are telepathic, not in the way of conveying details, but in the much more useful way of conveying a manner of thinking." ("The Touch of Your Hand.") "He knew without question that he had the skills of this people, and that he could call on any of those skills just by concentrating on a task until it came to him how the right way (for him) would feel. He knew without surprise that these resources transcended even death; for a man could have a skill and then it was everyman's, and if the man should die, his skill still lived in everyman." ("The Skills of Xanadu.")

Above and to the left of the sink in Sturgeon's kitchen is one of those crowded bulletin boards where odd items accumulate and stay in place for years. My eye was caught one night by a postcard bearing a line from Karl F. Gauss (German mathematician, 1777–1855), and I mentioned it, and Ted said it was one of his favorites, and from that time forward the quote has become a kind of touchstone in our conversations, we'll just naturally arrive at it in the course of what we're saying, look at each other, mumble some obeisance to "that line from Gauss," and move on from there. We can almost hear the theme music in the background....

The quote reads: "I have had my solutions for a long time; but I do not yet know how I am to arrive at them."

If you look at this long enough, it will tell you: how Sturgeon writes a story. How he lives. And the way in which a Sturgeon story affects the person who reads it.

Sturgeon's vision of a limited telepathic linkage that allows each person's skills to become everyman's is at least as important an idea as the notion of going to the moon, which originated in science fiction (thousands of years ago) and has been repeated over the years until somebody finally went ahead and acted it out. It is the idea, not the technology, that is the force behind human progress. As Frederik Pohl explained it in his brilliant story "The Gold at the Starbow's End": "Most problems have grammatical solutions. The problem of transporting people from

the Earth to any other planet does not get solved by putting pieces of steel together one at a time at random, and happening to find out you've built a spaceship by accident. It gets solved by constructing a model which describes the necessary circumstances under which the transportation occurs. Once you have the grammatical model, you just put the metal around it and it goes like gangbusters."

All of Sturgeon's stories are models: problems and solutions. He is a (very sympathetic) student of the human situation—what makes people tick? But to say that he has his solutions before he starts is not to say he knows the end of the story before he starts writing. The solution is the beginning of the story, it is the implicit harmony of the situation, the way things ought to be. As soon as we meet the people, the characters, we feel it. This harmony is violated by the problem(s) facing the characters—which is the dramatic element, the tension: if there were no problem, there would be no story, just a portrait. But there is a problem; and the end of the story, the climax of the plot, is not the solution (that's implicit, a restoration of order) but the how-to-arrive-at-it. At the end we discover how the solution is arrived at. And that's the part that Sturgeon (like Gauss) doesn't know until he gets there.

The secret I am trying to tell here is the art of storytelling, at its highest—how it's done. It's like Houdini getting himself locked in a trunk and thrown in the ocean. I don't think he knows beforehand how he's going to get out of that trunk. Rather, he's putting himself in a situation where he will be forced to focus every bit of his own strength and concentration on the problem at hand—and he knows that under those circumstances, and only those circumstances, he has the capability to find a way out. It's an act of faith.

The solution is: open the trunk. That's obvious. And the way to arrive at the solution is to lock yourself in the trunk. That's not obvious at all. But it's beautiful.

VI

Sturgeon came back from the islands and turned into a zombie. Originally he'd flown to New York for a ten-day visit, to get a new agent. "I went into some kind of a funk at the time, it must

have been a severe depression.” He found an agent, but he still hadn’t done any writing, and he couldn’t get together the money or the energy to fly back to St. Croix. So he stayed in Manhattan, sleeping eighteen to twenty hours a day.

Ten days became eight months, and finally Dorothe, who was still down in the islands with two kids and no money, decided she’d had enough, and asked for a divorce. Ted flew down to try to patch things up, but it was too late. His marriage was kaput. Another failure.

The atom bomb exploded in Hiroshima.

Sturgeon had moved in with a friend of John Campbell’s named L. Jerome Stanton. “Stanton had an apartment on Eighth Avenue with no furniture in it, and I had a whole warehouse full of furniture, so I moved my furniture into his place and just did anything he suggested ... you know, take the stuff out to the laundry or do the shopping or cook the dinner or something, until it was done, and then I just stopped, like a switch had been thrown, until he said to do something else. I was really in a zombie-ish condition....”

He got a job as copy chief in the advertising section of a wartime firm that made quartz crystals; that ended when he flew back to try to talk things through with Dorothe, and when he came back to New York he was more depressed than ever. He wrote to another high school girlfriend, Ree Dragonette, and eventually she came to live with him; meanwhile he was having lunch every day with John Campbell, editor of *Astounding* (*Unknown* had folded due to the wartime paper shortage), and spending time in the basement of John’s house in New Jersey. It was in that basement, at the end of 1945, after a dry spell of more than five years, that Sturgeon finally started writing again.

At first the new stories were almost 100% dialogue, as if Sturgeon were not yet ready to hear the sound of his own voice on paper. The third story—“Mewhu’s Jet,” about a visitor from outer space who turns out to be a little kid on a joy ride—was mostly dialogue, but the characters were stronger, the humor brighter, the human qualities of the situation more fully developed. Sturgeon’s storytelling skill was starting to reemerge.

And then came the breakthrough: a story called “Maturity,” a tense, warm, brilliant, utterly moving account of an irresistible, irresponsible young genius (songwriter/sculptor/poet/ne’er-do-

well) who undergoes a series of glandular treatments intended to make him grow up, biochemically speaking. It's a love story—the old eternal triangle—something of a detective story—a fabulous portrait of a fabulous human being who is not entirely unlike the author's idealized view of himself—and more, much more than that, a tale that transcends category to confront one of the central human riddles of any era: who am I? What is maturity?

And, like most of Sturgeon's best stories, and unlike most of the rest of postwar literature, it is heavy on plot: a real story is unfolded, the kind that sucks you in and glues your mind to the page, and all the other good stuff the storyteller offers is thrown in as a bonus and never allowed to get in the way of the story itself. Indeed, the bonus material—ideas, insights, detailed descriptions (the hero of "Maturity" compares his surprised doctor/lady-friend to a taffy-pulling machine, and launches into a tour-de-force description of how said machine operates and why it's so beautiful), charm—is all integral to and indistinguishable from the telling of the story; Sturgeon indulges himself constantly, wonderfully, and yet never wastes a word.

"Maturity" was followed by a succession of fine stories—notably "Thunder and Roses" (a sad, poetic yarn in which the United States is destroyed by atomic bombs but refuses to retaliate), "It Wasn't Syzygy" (a love story, written in magnificent metered prose, in which the horrified narrator discovers he's a figment of his girlfriend's imagination) and "The Perfect Host" (a tale of possession, built around a unique and powerful idea and told in a manner that breaks all the rules of storytelling—successfully). Each story was different, was brilliant in a whole new startling way. No one could guess what the man would do next.

Sturgeon became a superstar.

Now, in terms of the money to be made and the size of the audience, being a star in the science fiction world in the late '40s was a little like being a big frog in a rather small glass of water. But it was a respectable glass of water, from the point of view of the people inside it (outsiders, of course, considered science fiction worthless trash). Science-fiction people felt like they knew something everybody else didn't know....

Sturgeon had dreams of glory. He would complain about being stuck in the science-fiction ghetto, but he never made any real

effort to break out. For one thing, it was very comfortable there in the ghetto—he could write whatever he wanted to and be almost certain of selling it; editors knew him and would give him advances, his stories were read and praised by his peers, including all the writers he himself admired and respected ... and there was a freedom in the science-fiction field that did not and does not exist elsewhere, an openness to new ideas, unusual or shocking subject matter, innovative language or story structure. Sturgeon may have known intuitively that he would never enjoy such freedom in any other paying market.

But there was something else, too. Sturgeon had a great desire for success. Like any kid who's taken a career his parents don't approve of, he wanted *to show them* ... but he was blocked, there was something very strong inside him that told him he didn't deserve success, he didn't deserve his talent or the love of his friends or anything else good that seemed to come his way.

And he couldn't overcome this. He has not overcome it to this day. He still doesn't feel secure even about his own status within the science-fiction field! He reads the reviews, he hears the accolades, but he forgets them immediately. He lives in a world of his own, a world where he nurtures his own enormous self-doubt for his own impenetrable reasons.

"I'm not a writer," he told Judith Merrill in 1947. "A writer is someone who has to write. The only reason I write is because it's the only way I can justify all the other things I didn't do."

Robert Heinlein, who started writing science fiction at the same time Sturgeon did, came back from the war and started selling stories to *The Saturday Evening Post* (the number-one market for fiction at the time) and then wangled a contract with a major book publisher to do science fiction novels aimed at teenagers. Sturgeon had the same opportunity to break into the big time—in fact, in March of 1947, he won a \$1,000 short-story contest (Graham Greene took second place) sponsored by the British magazine *Argosy*, with a story called "Bianca's Hands." He exulted in this success, but made no serious attempt to use it as a steppingstone to broader commercial or literary acceptance. Indeed, he only submitted "Bianca's Hands"—a story he'd written before the war and had never been able to sell; one editor told him he'd never buy any story from a person who could write such a monstrous thing—to *Argosy* because it had been rejected by

every other possible market. He'd have gladly given it to anyone for a quick \$50; and indeed there were many stories he sold for \$50 or \$100 that could have gone to much better markets, but were never sent around because Ted needed the money right away and couldn't afford to wait or take a chance on rejection.

So, in 1948, when he needed more money than the science-fiction world could offer him, he went to work for Time, Inc., writing direct-mail copy for *Fortune* magazine. He was very good at it. ("Direct mail for Time, Inc. paid off at 2.3%. I wrote three 4% letters, and became a local hero.") He all but stopped writing stories. And he might have spent the rest of his days in the comfortable confines of Time, Inc., had it not been for a young woman named Marion McGahan.

VII

For thirty-eight years, Theodore Sturgeon has been trying not to write. He does everything in his power, leaps at any distraction, places every possible obstacle between himself and his typewriter and has indeed succeeded in damming the flow for weeks or years at a time. But always in the end his defenses fail him and a new flood of stories bursts through.

He won't admit it, but the real reason Ted doesn't write is that he doesn't want to. His stories, the good ones, are like demons; they possess him. He admires and takes pride in the finished product, but mostly he resents the intrusion. He wants to be left alone.

The '50s saw a burst of great stories from Sturgeon unlike anything before or since. Month after month brought miracle after miracle, like a pressurized can of genius letting go of its contents. It was an incredible performance. Sturgeon's defenses against writing had been utterly superseded, and it took him years to get them in place again.

This all started in the spring of 1952, after the birth of his first son, Robin.

Sturgeon fell in love with Marion McGahan in 1949; he was thirty-one, and she was eighteen. They lived together in Brooklyn for a while—he worked at Time, Inc. in Manhattan, and she worked in the Brooklyn Public Library. They were married in 1951. (Marion was Ted's third wife. He had been living with a

singer named Mary Mair since 1947, and had married her in 1948; but by the time of the marriage their relationship was already shaky, and they soon went their separate ways.)

Ted was content to go on doing what he was doing, tossing off occasional stories for the less demanding science fiction magazines (*Fantastic Adventures*, *Planet Stories*), secure in his job (by now he'd been transferred over to the promotion department of Time International), and enjoying his central role in the active social life of the science-fiction world in New York City. His current stories were unimpressive, but he was lionized for his past achievements and his ever-present charm.

But Marion had had this dream, for a long time, of living in the country with a writer, and she prevailed on Ted to make it come true for her. He dragged his feet, but ... "She wasn't happy with me working for a big, patronizing company—also she wanted to be near her mother, who lived upstate—there were a lot of reasons like that. More than anything else, I hadn't written for quite a while, and it was time I got back to my own work."

So they moved to a little stone house back in the woods in Congers, New York, and Marion gave birth to a boy named Robin (after the hero of Ted's story "Maturity"), and Ted wrote a story called "Baby Is Three," which later became the centerpiece of his novel *More than Human*.

In the next fourteen months he wrote, among other things: "A Saucer of Loneliness" (his classic story about a lonely girl, and the message she receives from a flying saucer), "The Clinic" (another story about loneliness and communication and love, an incredible tour de force in which he creates not only two unforgettable people but a whole new language—

I say, "What's this?" and I move the arms.

He say, "Violin?"

I say, "Yes. Make one noise, a new noise—one and one and one. Now," I say, "what's this?" and I move again. "Banjo," he say. "Guitar, maybe."

"Make many noise, in set. Make a new set. And a new set. Yes?"

"Yes," he say. "It's played in chords, mostly. What are you getting at?"

I bump on side of head. "You have think word and word and word and you make set. I have think set and set and set."

—that makes more sense than our own), "The Touch of Your

Hand,” “Mr. Costello, Hero,” “And My Fear Is Great” (three unforgettable characters this time, including an old woman who knows about yoga and yin and yang, but has a hard time learning that her powers are limited by her Victorian view of sex), “The Silken Swift” (a beautifully written fable about two women, a man, and a unicorn), “The Sex Opposite” (there are androgynous creatures among us), “The World Well Lost” (a taboo-breaker about homosexuality), “The Fabulous Idiot” and “Morality” (the two other sections of *More than Human*) and “A Way of Thinking” (another classic Sturgeon tale, about a voodoo doll and a man who just doesn’t think the way everyone else does—another one of those stories that makes you wonder where this guy learned to write like that, which is a question that has no answer).

Sturgeon’s career was taking off like a skyrocket, again. His first books—a short-story collection in 1948, and a novel, *The Dreaming Jewels*, in 1949—had been published by small presses specializing in science fiction. Now he was getting contracts from respected “mainstream” publishing houses. Farrar, Strauss published *More than Human* in hardcover, and it got terrific reviews (“One fears to toss about words like ‘profundity’ and ‘greatness’ in connection with the literature of entertainment; but it’s hard to avoid them here.”—*New York Herald Tribune*). BMI asked him to write a science fiction opera. Opportunity was knocking everywhere.

But there were some problems in paradise. Ted tended to spend money as fast as it came in—sometimes faster—and so even at the height of his productivity he was always strapped for funds and looking around for more ways to make money. This got him involved in television—as early as 1952 he did a Studio One script and then complained to a friend afterwards that, although the money was good, it was a tremendous amount of work and the final results were unsatisfying. But he continued to take TV work whenever he could find it.

Another bad habit he got into about this time was the contract dilemma. This is a horrible thing writers and publishers do to each other, where you sign a contract to write a book, and get some money, and then you have to write it. Sturgeon’s success with *More than Human* enabled him to get a contract for a novel he wanted to write about a galactic supermind that swallows the human race. The book was due in October 1954, at which point

Sturgeon would get the second half of his advance. Trying to write the novel kept Sturgeon from getting much other work done. Failing to write it—sometimes an idea just won't come when you push at it—meant the money he was counting on didn't materialize. Financial pressure, guilt, a bad reputation among publishers ... This particular book project sat on Sturgeon's back (his editor was once heard to remark, "I know Sturgeon can write a novel in three days, but which three days?") for four years—it was finally completed in early 1958, and published as *The Cosmic Rape*. It was the first of many such problem contracts, most of them compounded by Sturgeon's ability to get further advances on already overdue books by describing some (always authentic) unexpected financial emergency.... Sturgeon got into this writer's quicksand early, and what's amazing is that it took him so long to go down.

1953 was a high point, but Sturgeon continued to produce extraordinary stories in 1954 and the next few years. Many of his very best works—"Bright Segment," "When You're Smiling," "And Now the News," "To Here and the Easel" (a story about a painter who can't paint), "Hurricane Trio," "The Other Man"—date from this period. One such story a year would more than justify a \$20,000 annual survival grant from the National Endowment of the Arts, if there were such a thing, and Sturgeon was turning out four or five major works a year.

Until 1958.

Tandy was born in 1954, and Noël (Ted and Marion's second daughter, and Ted's fourth) in 1956. In 1957 Ted decided it was time to leave Congers, and he and the family moved to a house in Truro, Massachusetts, near the tip of Cape Cod. (He became friends with Kurt Vonnegut at this time; and later Vonnegut used him as a partial model for his character Kilgore Trout.)

Ted finally wrote *The Cosmic Rape* that year on the Cape, along with several short stories, one of which, "The Comedian's Children," about a manipulative TV personality, was another impossible triumph—that story tore me into little pieces when I was twelve years old, and it remains one of the most powerful pieces of fiction I've ever read.

But the Cape was cold and lonely, and the Sturgeon family decided they could live cheaper and happier in the West Indies. Ted's mother was teaching on St. Vincent, and she found them a

place on the island of Bequi. They arrived—three kids, possessions, etc.—and the house was too small, noisy, no privacy ... so they began months of island-hopping, searching for a home. They ended up on Grenada. Ted had no place to write during all this, but he kept trying. He was working on a story called “The Man Who Lost the Sea.”

At the end of 1958, he finished the story. It was the only thing he’d written all year. The money was long gone, patience was gone, the romantic dream of living in the West Indies was gone. Ted’s agent sent back the story, saying he couldn’t understand it. Eventually it sold to *The Magazine of Fantasy & Science Fiction*, but by that time the Sturgeons were back in Congers, at Marion’s mother’s house, trying to sort things out, looking for a place to settle down. Ted had finally done it: spent an entire year working on one twelve-page story. Wrecked by the tropics again.

(It was a beautiful story, and Martha Foley later selected it for her *Best Short Stories of the Year* anthology. But it didn’t pay the rent, even in Grenada.) The years of high productivity had come to an end.

There were more great works to come, of course—two superb novels (*Venus Plus X*, 1960, about a world where the two sexes have merged into one; and *Some of Your Blood*, 1961, a fictionalized case history of an authentic vampire, due someday I think to come into its own as one of the finer short novels of the century) and a handful of major stories (“Need,” “Tandy’s Story,” “When You Care, When You Love,” “If All Men Were Brothers, Would You Want One to Marry Your Sister?” and “Slow Sculpture”) spread out over the next ten years. But the floodgates weren’t open anymore; instead we have the occasional burst of genius slipping through. There was a minor breakthrough in 1969–1970, after Sturgeon’s marriage to his fourth wife, Wina, which resulted in the Hugo and Nebula awards winner “Slow Sculpture,” plus several other stories I liked, and several I didn’t like, and a beautiful but unfinished (and unpublished) novel called *Godbody*. Still, looking at the total picture, it seems fair to say that Sturgeon’s desire not-to-write has been pretty solidly in control for the last fifteen years or more.

The question everybody asks, of course, is will his genius break free again, will there be more great stories from Theodore

Sturgeon?

I'm here to tell you I've studied this matter very carefully, and I think it makes no difference. Don't worry about it. Everything's all right.

VIII

"They didn't sing? Oh, you've got to hear them sing together.

..."—Theodore Sturgeon, talking to me on the phone, 1976

My search for the man who wrote those stories has taken me many places—but never have I felt closer to the mystery than I did one very cold, exciting evening, after a blizzard, last February 2nd, in a small two-room apartment in the middle of Woodstock, New York.

Robin Sturgeon (age 24) works in a paint store Tuesday through Saturday, and plays (guitar) in Jerry Moore's band on weekends. So Monday was the day for me to see him, and it didn't matter that the Monday I chose it was snowing, with winds so wild they closed the New York Thruway.... I just waited in the Port Authority terminal from six in the morning 'til three in the afternoon and when I finally got off the bus that evening into the zero-degree weather and friendly stillness of a small town after a storm, well, I felt very pleased to be there.

I found Robin's apartment after a minute or two—he greeted me warmly, made a pot of coffee and a telephone call—and we started talking. A few minutes later the others arrived: Tandy (then a senior at college, a poet), Noël (a freshman at the same college, a would-be law student) and Timothy (still in high school, a hiker and mountain climber). I hadn't expected to meet all four of Ted and Marion's children—and I wouldn't have, except for that blizzard. A lucky break. The next three and a half hours of excited conversation and collective attention—focusing conjured up the real Theodore Sturgeon more clearly and solidly than if he'd been sitting in the room.

(We were in Woodstock because that's where Ted and Marion finally settled, in 1959; and when Ted left and moved to California in 1966, the children stayed with Marion. Now Robin has his own apartment, and the two girls are off at college; but Woodstock is "home.")

Early in this article I mentioned that Theodore Sturgeon and I have been “friends of a sort” for two or three years now; and now I have to explain why I chose those words. It’s because of something Ted said to me several times (he never says anything just once), notably last December.

“You ask me who to speak to; well, Wina makes the point that I don’t have any friends. I know lots and lots of people, and lots of people know me—lots of people feel they are my friends, and although I welcome them, when I see them, I still don’t feel ... I don’t seek anyone out. When people come to me, that’s fine. But I really don’t reach out to anybody.”

Ted is a slippery person. People who know him casually are dazzled by him, because he seems so interested in them, so caring. People who know him or have known him well invariably express strong feelings of resentment mixed in with whatever else they feel towards him—basically, I think, because they feel rejected, he doesn’t seem to care about them anymore, and it hurts. The only exceptions, the only people I talked to who did not radiate powerfully mixed feelings about Ted, were his children. Because they are the only people I talked to who do not feel separated from him.

And that isn’t because they’re flesh of his flesh (we all know that the separation and resentment between parents and children can be awesome). No, I think it’s because they’re the only people who have accepted Theodore Sturgeon on his own terms. They’re hardly unaware of his weaknesses—but, collectively at least, they accept them; they’re capable of seeing things his way.

That evening in Robin’s apartment I began to comprehend what had been staring me in the face all along: that Sturgeon’s different way of seeing things is the key to all his problems and miracles. He’s aware of this difference, proud of it, eager to share it with the rest of us (there’s an evangelistic or “world-saving” current that runs through a lot of his writing)—but he’s also ashamed of his gift, because he learned very early that the world doesn’t like people who are different. And so he’s been trying all his life to convince himself that he’s really just like everybody else.

Praise him for his talent, and he’ll be pleased, on the surface; but deep inside, you’ve reopened an ancient wound.

So he does things backwards, partly because he sees things

backwards, and inside out, and partly because he has to protect himself from a world where pleasure is pain. He writes because his stories bring him acceptance, and attention, and love, and like most of us he wants these things. But like many of us, he also fears these things, and so in his skillful and perverse way he tries not to write. And the result of these two contrary streams eddying and flowing against each other is something rich and strange.

The next day (after the blizzard), I talked with Marion, and she gave me a new perspective on Ted and his procrastination. We were talking about how maybe he would have been happier if he hadn't had the talent to write, and had spent his life doing something else, like fixing toys, instead. But then it occurred to Marion that it was the same thing with the toys—he loved to fix the children's toys, and he did a beautiful job of it, but over the years his office became filled with boxes and boxes of broken toys waiting to be fixed. You could go in and pick up a fire engine covered with dust and he'd tell you to put it down because he was just about to get around to it. And he believed it. "It has something to do with time in some way," Marion said. "It's as though everything is always in the present."

That's it. The children grow up and don't need their toys anymore, but Ted is living—not in the past, but in an eternal present, where a moment ago this toy was brought to him, and in another moment, just as soon as he takes care of one or two other things, he's going to fix it better than new.

What is special about this man is that he cares so much about the people and things that exist inside his moment. If you're not in front of him right now, you're out of his mind completely; but the world that is before his eyes excites him, delights him, astounds him, always—he has a sense of wonder about everything he sees that is childlike but all the more intense because it's coming from an adult. He radiates enthusiasm, and as perhaps you can imagine, he was a very wonderful father to his children.

And as you can also imagine, he is one of the world's worst businessmen; and he doesn't know it and won't admit it and he'll be furious with me for writing this sentence. He still feels his manhood is on the line here. Contracts go unsigned, letters go unwritten, he has this master plan that he does little to implement but meanwhile he tries to prevent his books from

being reissued so they won't interfere with the plan. He relishes the dream of having all his work available in a uniform edition. But deep inside him, I have to believe, there's something that feels much safer knowing people can't read what he's written.

I'm impatient, obviously, with Ted and his eternal present. But it's him. It's his curse and the source of all his pain; but it's also his gift, the source of all his pride and accomplishment.

This is where Sturgeon's miracles come from: they come from his ability to take the ordinary world and see it from a different point of view, stand it on its head and make it fascinating without taking away its palpable reality. They come from the empathy he feels for all people who have a different way of seeing things, and his ability to heighten the reader's empathy to an astonishing degree, until we are forced to agree with the Roman playwright Terence: "I am a man: nothing human is alien to me."

Most of all, his stories come from his ability to care about the people in front of him—that is, the characters in whatever story he happens to be working on. When he writes, he lives in the eternal present of those people and that place and time. And when he solves the central problem of the story, or rather when the characters he has created solve it for him, the sensation for the reader is overwhelming, because Sturgeon has in fact solved all the problems of the world at that moment. He gives himself entirely to each real story he writes, and when he arrives at his solution, the reader, who has also given himself to the story, experiences a moment of overriding intensity and liberation—regardless of whether the resolution of the story is horrifying or beautiful (it's usually a little of both).

And that's the other thing. There is someone else, other than Ted's children, who accepts Sturgeon completely on his own terms, and that's the person who is reading a Sturgeon story. The essence of reading fiction is, as Coleridge suggested, "a willing suspension of disbelief." We are seduced; we give ourselves to the storyteller. We see things his way. And if his way of seeing things is truly different, and truly uplifting, then we experience something greater than ourselves each time we listen to his stories.

"I was embarrassed as a kid—he had this beard and everything—I wanted him to be straight and drive a fire

truck. Later I realized I got much more than most kids did: a sense of wonder, and the courage to use it.”—Robin Sturgeon

IX

Theodore Sturgeon, best living American short story writer, was also the first person in the history of the Philadelphia school system to do a back flyaway dismount. But he worked so hard to prove himself as a flyer, an athlete, that he disabled himself (or you could say he was struck down by the gods, if that’s how you want to look at it). He has a history of trying too hard.

Theodore Sturgeon is a success. He has more great stories in him, and he may or may not get around to writing them sometime in the next few decades. But it doesn’t matter. The man is capable of stretching out a day’s postponement into a twenty-year sidetrack, or of compressing a lifetime into six hours of writing. We need not concern ourselves with trying to determine exactly where on his immeasurable time scale he happens to be right now. What’s important to us, his readers, is that he’s already written more heart-shaking, earth-changing great short stories than most of us will ever have time to read.

And even if he has completed this stage of his career—which I doubt—what of it? What has he got to prove? Is it a tragedy not to be able to do back flyaway dismounts forever?

The best thing the public can do for a writer is leave him alone. In which case, you ask, why have I written this essay? I didn’t do it to call attention to the writer. I did it to call attention to the stories.

Our heroes have to have feet of clay, not so we can bring them down to our level but so we can rise to theirs. We have to become our own heroes; and if it’s true that these stories, “Bright Segment” and *More than Human* and “The Comedian’s Children” and all the rest of them, were written by a human being, then I think there’s hope for all of us.

Meanwhile, on the outskirts of Los Angeles, Andros Sturgeon (age 6) has brought his father a toy to be fixed; and sometime before he goes to sleep tonight, Ted’s going to feed the rabbits.

Story Notes

Noël Sturgeon

The stories in this last volume of *The Complete Stories of Theodore Sturgeon* were written between 1973 and 1983, with the exception of “Tuesdays are Worse,” published in 1960. In 1973, Sturgeon was living in Los Angeles with his then-partner, Wina Sturgeon, and their son, Andros. The relationship was rocky, however, and Sturgeon left the house and began living in a one-room basement apartment on Vendome Street in the Silverlake District of Los Angeles. Throughout his writing career, Sturgeon preferred small, crowded and often, underground spaces in which to write, but the Vendome basement apartment was the epitome of the cave-like spaces he loved. Part of its address was the designation 1/4, indicating its size, and it had a hobbit-like door only one-half the size of a normal door. The apartment especially delighted Sturgeon, and he kept it as an office for many years after he ceased living there full-time. During this period, he was still trying to find work as a screenwriter, and to sell his own work to filmmakers. *More Than Human* (1953) was optioned by different parties, including Orson Welles, from the early 1970s until about 2000, but a film has not been made to date. In 1974, a French film was made of Sturgeon’s short story, “Bright Segment,” (Volume 8) directed by Christian Chalonge. *Parcelles Brilliantes* aired that year on the French TV series *Histoires Insolites*, and the film was often used by Sturgeon in his writing classes.

In 1975, he won the Inkpot Award from the San Diego Comic Convention, in recognition of the influence of his story, “It,” on comic-book creations such as The Swamp Thing. In 1977, he won an Outstanding Achievement Award from the International Society of Science Fiction, Horror and Fantasy for the *Star Trek* screenplay, “Amok Time” (one of three *Star Trek* screenplays he wrote. “Shore Leave” aired on 12/29/66 and “Amok Time” on 9/15/67; this latter episode is famous for giving Spock a sex life and inventing the “Live long and prosper” Vulcan greeting. “The

Joy Machine” was never aired but was later expanded by James Gunn and published as a book.)

From 1969 onwards, Sturgeon had begun to publish both stories and book reviews in a market new for him: “men’s” magazines (*Knight*, *Adam*, *Chic*, *Hustler*, and *Penthouse*). Sturgeon had frequently expressed frustration that straitlaced rules in publishing prevented him from writing explicitly about sex; now he had that freedom. Since the early 1960s, he had been writing a novel, *Godbody*, which told a tale of a Jesus-like figure who saw sex as a combination of love and worship. It contained several explicit sex scenes, and he felt unable to publish it (or indeed finish it) as a result. In the middle 1970s, he began working again on the novel, and it was published posthumously in 1986 (despite a persistent rumor, the posthumous work was not rewritten by Robert Heinlein; however, the similarities between *Godbody* and Heinlein’s *Stranger in a Strange Land* are noticeable, and not too surprising given that the writing of both stems from the early 1960s). Whether or not this new freedom to write explicitly about sex produced better work is for the reader to judge; several stories written for this market can be found in this volume.

Around 1975, after his relationship with Wina ended, Sturgeon met Jayne Tannehill Englehart, a teacher and aspiring writer, at a science-fiction convention. As they became partners and began living together, Jayne changed her last name to Sturgeon; to others, Ted always called her “Lady Jayne.” Jayne’s exceptional organizing talents and financial know-how were of crucial assistance to Sturgeon in overcoming crushing accumulated debt, disarray in his business affairs, and unmet obligations to his Woodstock and Los Angeles families. His inability to manage his business affairs effectively had been a longstanding frustration for him; while contemporaries such as Robert Heinlein, Arthur C. Clarke, and Ray Bradbury became relatively wealthy, Sturgeon had always struggled financially. In 1977, in a letter to his lawyer; his domestic, film and international agents; a new business manager; and Paul Williams (who managed his copyrights), he says:

I want to be a writer who writes. The purpose of this letter is to bring this about. A year or so I had a blinding insight, brought about by a radio commercial (Brentwood Savings,

to give credit where it is due) which contained the line: Fifty-one percent of smart is knowing what you are dumb at. Now, I have lots of documentation that I am real smart, from a shelf full of trophies to listings in Who's Who and the Hall of Fame, and because of that I have always been certain that I could do anything—once I put my mind to it. Time enough to look at that tax stuff come April 13. Pay that traffic ticket “later.” Things like that. And, insidiously, over the years, I have achieved a towering triumph of mismanagement, and find myself, and my irreplaceable time, concerned with matters I am dumb at, instead of writing. I am now ready to concede and confess this, and to surround myself with the people who, in my most carefully considered judgment, are the best in the world at what they do, to the end that I may become simply and solely a writer-who-writes, while we all benefit.... I cannot close without a mention of my Lady Jayne. Wina and I came to the parting of the ways a year ago last April. In July I met Jayne, and I feel altogether confident in asserting that I have at last found what I have been looking for since I was born—no less than that. Although I refuse to make her my secretary, I will say that she has a solid grasp on reality and reality's priorities, and will see to it in every way humanly possible that I take care of things in the proper order. She understands taxes and trust funds, investments and banking. And me. I have never been happier in my life, nor had more to work for.

His relationship with Jayne began an extremely happy and productive stage of Sturgeon's life during which, though he wrote few stories, he became deeply involved in teaching writing and presenting at science-fiction conventions around the country. He loved to work with students, especially young writers, a role well suited to him as a charismatic legend with a message (as former students such as Octavia Butler have fondly recalled). He taught summer courses for several years at the Intensive English Institute on the Teaching of Science Fiction, run by James Gunn and hosted by the Center for the Study of Science Fiction at the University of Kansas, Lawrence. (Gunn later helped establish the annual Sturgeon Short Story Award in 1987, one of the most

prestigious awards in science fiction.) Sturgeon also taught short writing courses at other colleges and made public presentations around the U.S. and in Europe, particularly France, Ireland, and England. His dizzying travel schedule for the last years of his life was thoroughly organized by Jayne, and not incidentally, began to pay his debts. In 1982, a French TV series, *De bien estranges*, aired an episode, "L'amour qui tue," based on the short story, "The Wages of Synergy" (Volume Seven). The organization of his papers by Jayne made possible the publication of four new collections of Sturgeon stories: *Visions and Venturers* (1978), *The Stars Are the Styx* (1979), *The Golden Helix* (1979), and *Alien Cargo* (1984); the latter three collections were inspired and edited by Paul Williams, and can be seen as an early attempt by Paul to find a way to republish many of Sturgeon's difficult-to-find short stories, which culminated in *The Complete Stories* project.

From 1976 to 1985, after a brief period of living in San Diego, Jayne and Ted shuttled regularly between Los Angeles (where his son Andros lived) and Springfield, Oregon. Diagnosed in 1976 as suffering from idiopathic diffuse interstitial fibrosis of the lungs, by 1984, Sturgeon found it harder and harder to breathe and engage in regular activities. In January of 1985, he went alone to Maui to try an alternative healing regimen. When it was apparent that the regimen was failing, he returned to Springfield, very ill. He died in the hospital in Eugene on May 8, 1985. Present were Jayne; two family friends, Charles Holloway and Rennie Cantine; six of his seven children (Patricia, Robin, Tandy, Noël, Timothy, and Andros); and his third wife, Marion. He was 67. With a strange prescience, one of his most famous and beloved stories, "The Man Who Lost the Sea" (Volume 10), contains a detailed description of how it feels to die from lack of air.

After Sturgeon's death, obituaries in *The New York Times*, many regional papers, *Locus Magazine* and other science fiction outlets recognized his stature as a writer, and his significant influence on the field of science fiction as well as the broader culture. Two *Twilight Zone* episodes were aired in 1986, "A Saucer of Loneliness" (Sturgeon claimed that Mama Cass of the pop group Mamas and the Papas was a special fan of "A Saucer of Loneliness" [Volume Seven], and when approached about filming it, he recommended that she play the part of the female protagonist. The *Twilight Zone* episode, written by David Gerrold,

had Shelley Duvall in the main role), and “A Matter of Minutes” (based on his story “Yesterday Was Monday” [Volume 2] and written by Harlan Ellison® and Rockne S. O’Bannon). In 2000, he was awarded the Gaylactica Spectrum Award for his groundbreaking 1953 story about homosexuality, “The World Well Lost” (Volume 7). Also, in 2000, Sturgeon was elected to the Science Fiction Hall of Fame, now based in the Science Fiction Museum in Seattle, which displays several Sturgeon-related objects, including the portrait of Sturgeon painted by Ed Emshwiller which was used as the cover for the collection *E Pluribus Unicorn* (1953) as well as Volume 7 of this series, a letter from Heinlein to Sturgeon suggesting story ideas, and a copy of the Pioneer 10 plaque from the Apollo mission signed to Ted by Carl Sagan, one of its designers. (The Pioneer 10 and 11 unmanned space missions were the first to travel past the solar system into deep space, and the plaques were designed to communicate our location and physique to alien intelligences. A few of the plaques were given to artists, writers and musicians who in Sagan’s judgment were influential representatives of human cultural production; Sturgeon was one of them.) In 2005, a play based on his story, “The Graveyard Reader” (Volume Ten), ran as part of the Theater Phantastique at the Wooden-O Theater in Los Angeles. In 2005, Jon Knautz directed a short film from the short story “The Other Celia” (Volume Nine); it aired on the Canadian Broadcasting Company in January 2008. Consistently appearing on numerous “best of sf” lists, *More Than Human* has been in print since it was published in 1953, and Sturgeon’s fiction continues to be sold around the world.

“Tuesdays are Worse” (*Chatelaine: The Canadian Home Journal*, vol 33, no 1, January 1960). Teaser: “Les lived with a fear he could not talk about. It followed him home, to be borne though not understood by Angela and their child ... until that night. A story no married couple should miss.” The abusive behavior of the father in this story recalls Sturgeon’s description of his treatment as a child by his stepfather, found in the autobiographical essay *Argyll* (1993). My thanks to William F. Seabrook, Sturgeon bibliographer extraordinaire, for finding this story in time to include it.

“Case and the Dreamer” (*Galaxy*, January 1973) Reprinted in *Case and the Dreamer* (Doubleday 1974), which also contained the novellas “If All Men Were Brothers, Would You Let One Marry Your Sister?” and “When You Care, When You Love” (both in Volume Eleven). “Case” was written originally as a pilot for NBC. The dedication to the Doubleday volume reads: “For Herb Solow, without whom Case would never have been written.” Herb Solow was an agent, TV producer and at one time head of MGM Studios. He met Sturgeon when he worked for Desilu Studios, which produced *Star Trek*. “Case and the Dreamer” was never completed as a pilot.

“Agnes, Accent and Access” (*Galaxy*, April 1973) Teaser: “The computer knew the answer to everything—except Agnes!” Written many years before desktop or laptop computers were invented, this detailed imagination of such a device reads more and more over time like the machines we use today. Perhaps subvocalization of voice-directed typing programs is one step away. Sturgeon’s third wife, Marion, grew up in the Bronx, and though she did not usually have a noticeable accent, it could be brought out under times of stress, an effect her children delighted in producing. (An irony is that many of the stories in these last two volumes were put into electronic form through the use of MacSpeech Dictate, a voice-directed program that consistently mishears my New York-inflected pronunciation of “orange” as “are range.”)

“Ingenious Aylmer” (*Harper’s*, December 1973) This is one of two very short stories featuring the character Ejler Edgar Aylmer, an eccentric genius who works in his basement.

“The Sheriff of Chayute” (*Sturgeon’s West*, Doubleday 1973). The series of western stories of which “Sheriff” is one were credited “with Don Ward,” but as made clear for the earlier stories published in Volumes 10 and 11, they were written solely by Sturgeon, sometimes from ideas bounced off his friend Ward, the editor of *Zane Grey’s Western Magazine*.

“The Mysterium” (Circa 1974–1976. Previously unpublished.)

The original manuscript is typed on the letterhead with two unicorns most commonly used during the period in the middle 1970s when Sturgeon lived in the small apartment on Vendome Street in Los Angeles. Though he kept this apartment after 1976, when he began his relationship with Jayne Williams and began to spend time in San Diego and then in Eugene, Oregon, it is likely that this story was written earlier than that time. Sturgeon's invention of a noun "woodstocker," and verb "woodstocking" as describing making a living from music festivals is interesting, because of his time spent living in Woodstock, NY in the early and middle 1960s. It is possible that this story is unfinished.

"I Love Maple Walnut" (*Harper's*, May 1974) This is the second very short story written about the inventor Ejler Edgar Aylmer. William F. Seabrook provides the following note of interest about the *Harper's* stories: "They appeared in a section of the magazine called 'Wraparound,' a series of pieces relating to a common theme. One month the theme was Love, and along with [Sturgeon's] short-short story ['I Love Maple Walnut'], they published 'The Irish Girl's Lament'; as this was also included in, and gave the title for, [the Sturgeon story] 'And My Fear Is Great,' [Volume Seven] surely this must have been at his suggestion." (Seabrook, personal communication) Sturgeon indeed constantly promoted "The Irish Girl's Lament" as one of the most beautiful statements written about love, in his opinion, and it is quoted in full in the story "And My Fear Is Great." The poem was collected by W.B. Yeats, and is used in the movie version of James Joyce's "The Dead," directed by John Huston.

"Blue Butter" (*Fantasy and Science Fiction*, October 1974) Teaser: "From the one writer in this issue whose name also appeared on the front cover of Vol. 1, No. 1, Fall 1949, a small story with a huge theme, about the day in which a computer reads out the Final Extrapolation. Ladies and Gentlemen, Theodore Sturgeon ..." In an incident that mirrors the one in the story, in 1968, Sturgeon's fourteen-year old daughter Tandy accidentally ran through a plate glass door and suffered multiple wounds and extensive bleeding. Sturgeon was present and administered first aid, possibly saving her life.

“The Singsong of Cecily Snow” (*Heavy Metal*, October 1977) An example of Sturgeon’s lyrical fantasy writing, reminiscent of his “unicorn story,” “The Silken-Swift,” (Volume 7) which is discussed by Peter S. Beagle in his introduction to this volume.

“Harry’s Note” (*Chrysalis*, Roy Torgeson, ed., Zebra 1977) Another example of Sturgeon’s belief that empathy (or love) is a key to human evolution and survival, but in a very pessimistic rendering. Did Sturgeon really meet Leary, Metzner, and Alpert in Woodstock? There was indeed a Café Espresso in the town, and Leary, and possibly the others, were often at Millbrook, just across the Hudson River from the Woodstock area. As Sturgeon was fond of saying after recounting an improbable version of what had actually happened, “it could have been.” The evocation of the Golden Rule with the phrase: “do as you would be done by” echoes of one of Sturgeon’s favorite children’s books, *The Water Babies*, by Charles Kingsley (1862–63), which featured a good fairy, Mrs. Doasyouwouldbedoneby and a bad fairy, Mrs. Bedonebyasyoudid. The phrase “Thou art God,” of course, evokes the famous Robert A. Heinlein novel, *Strangers in a Strange Land* (1961). Sturgeon and Heinlein were good friends, and though they disagreed politically (particularly about the economy and about the necessity of war), they shared an interest in challenging social strictures on nudity and sex, and a strong distaste for organized religion. Heinlein named his fictional character “Waldo” and the manipulative devices Waldo invents “waldoes” in honor of Sturgeon’s birthname (Sturgeon was born Edward Hamilton Waldo). The term “waldoes” took and is still in use in scientific laboratories today. Sturgeon named a character in his story “The Other Man” (Volume 9) “Anson,” Heinlein’s middle name, in gratitude for Heinlein’s suggesting the story idea to him. Resonances of this long relationship, and the close parallels between Sturgeon’s novel *Godbody*, and Heinlein’s *Stranger*, are also apparent in two stories in this volume: “The Country of Afterward,” and “The Trick,” below. Heinlein died three years to the day after Sturgeon, on May 8, 1988.

“Time Warp” (*Omni Magazine*, October 1978; Reprinted in the *Best of Omni Science Fiction No. 2*, Ben Bova, ed., Omni Pub,

1981). Teaser from the original: "She was held by a force beam and bending over her was one of the members of the Mindpod." Editorial afterword from Ben Bova and Robert Myrus, in the *Best of Omni* collection: "Theodore Sturgeon, prominent SF short story writer for more than thirty years and author of several novels, most notably *More Than Human*, an International Fantasy Award winner, is famous as a stylist and for his preoccupation with the ameliorating power of love. In 'Time Warp,' Sturgeon seems to be saying that in both matters of politics and of the heart, sometimes the way to get ahead is to go along." The character Will Hawklane, the epitome of the macho hero, is presented by Sturgeon as constantly endangering his allies through his aggressive and egotistic tendencies. Hawklane could be seen as a (fond) critique of "space opera" science fiction, with Captain James T. Kirk as possibly the most recent example in his mind, given Sturgeon's experience on the *Star Trek* set (where he made good friends of many of the cast of the first *Star Trek* series). In both of the televised *Star Trek* scripts written by Sturgeon, "Shore Leave" and "Amok Time," the plots feature Kirk's physical bravery and the joy he finds in one-on-one fighting, as well as the risks to others involved in his attraction to violence and heroic deeds.

"The Country of Afterward" (*Hustler*, January 1979) Sturgeon writes, in a 1978 letter to his agent, Kirby McCauley: "*I have just sold Larry Flynt [publisher of Hustler] pubs my very first explicit sex story. It's a blockbuster with a great many important things to say during the bumps and moans.*" The theme of this story echoes the ideas in Sturgeon's posthumously published novel, *Godbody* (1986), which he worked on from the early 1960s. That sex and love were forms of spiritual worship, and that the open exploration and expression of the relationship between them would cure many of the world's ills (including war, cancer, inequality and exploitation), was one of Sturgeon's enduring beliefs and a constant message in much of his writing. This argument, along with the other repeated theme of human connection and gestalt, was an important influence on the counterculture of the 1960s and 1970s (see David Crosby's introduction to Volume 6). The characters in this story remind this reader, at least, of Heinlein's *Stranger in a Strange Land*; an

older, powerful man is adored by sexy young women, who, although talented, highly educated people with advanced professional degrees, seem to prefer spending most of their time having sex with older men as a means to create a better world.

“Like Yesterday” (*Rolling Stone*, May 20, 1979) Certainly a story that reverberates today, as the movement to legalize marijuana gains strength. Sturgeon was not a pot smoker himself, claiming that he didn’t get much of a high when he did try it.

“Why Dolphins Don’t Bite” (*Omni*, in three parts, published February, March and April, 1980), reprinted in *Medea’s World* (Harlan Ellison®, ed., Phantasia 1985). Written as part of the collaborative venture started by Harlan Ellison®, in which several science-fiction writers wrote stories based in a common setting, *Medea’s World*. Some of the ideas in this story are shocking (for example, that cannibalism and incest might confer important powers of interstellar, interspecies and time-travelling communication), demonstrating Sturgeon’s comfort with imagining truly horrible things (as exemplified by such horror tales as “It,” “Bianca’s Hands” (both in Volume 1), “The Professor’s Teddy Bear” (Volume Four), and *Some of Your Blood* (1961). “Dolphins” also repeats a theme that appears in many places in Sturgeon’s work (as noted by Paul Williams in his essay in this volume): that humans are excluded from an ability held by other species across the universe to simultaneously and immediately access ideas, skills, and information from collectively produced sources (See “Time Warp” [in this volume], “The Skills of Xanadu” [Volume 9], *To Marry Medusa*, “The Touch of Your Hand” [Volume 7], and *More Than Human*). Had Sturgeon lived seven more years, he would have experienced the World-Wide Web, which in many ways—especially email, search engines and wikis—realizes this persistent vision of instantaneous sharing of information and global communication. Given the questions raised in this story, would Sturgeon have judged the Internet to be crucifix or pogo-stick?

“Vengeance Is.” (*Dark Forces*, Kirby McCauley, ed., Viking 1980). Editor’s introduction: “Theodore Sturgeon, born on Staten

Island, New York, old American stock dating back to 1640, is one of the acknowledged masters of modern fantasy and science fiction, both in his short work and in such fine novels as *More Than Human* and *The Dreaming Jewels*. His styles are many: witty, spare, hard-boiled, and lyrically expressive. He's a remarkably inventive and powerful writer and there is reason to suspect his best stories will be remembered long after those of nearly all now posing for posterity and academic circles and in the literary quarterlies. Harlan Ellison once observed that Theodore Sturgeon knows more about love than anyone he'd ever met. And, in fact, the Sturgeon you might meet is earnest, warm, and sympathetic, a man whom you immediately feel cares and understands. But, as the story testifies, he also understands the hurtful, twisted side of human nature." Written with the example of *candida* in mind, this story predates the appearance of HIV/AIDS, but Sturgeon was amazed at the resonances of the story with that epidemic when it occurred. (Personal communication, Jayne Williams.)

"Seasoning" 1981. In a letter to his agent, Kirby McCauley, Sturgeon says that this story was published in 1981 by Goldmann in Germany, but I have not been able to confirm this. Otherwise, it is previously unpublished. The ideas outlined in this story echo the "Macro Philosophy" of Thea Alexander found in her science-fiction book, *2150 A.D.* There is a significant difference, however, in the idea that "entities" are creating "scripts" not just out of curiosity in order to have new experiences (as Alexander presents them), but in order to try to find universal truths, identifying which ones could form a lasting ethos by working them out in different contexts, different worlds. This is an amendment created by Jayne and Ted. (Jayne Williams, personal communication) The ethos offered here, that in the face of war, violent competition and suffering, one should and can create something good from what one has to work with, and share it, is pure Sturgeon. At the time of the writing of this story, Jayne Sturgeon was an ordained minister of the American Holistic Church, and was teaching a course in Universal Law in San Diego. The character in this story, Alice—with her long brown hair and blue eyes, her ability to wait and listen while someone worked something through, her peals of laughter—is clearly modeled on

Jayne. Sturgeon dabbled in many forms of therapy and later, self-help or New Age philosophies, but never remained a proponent of any one of them. Besides the Freudian analysis described in "Baby is Three" (Volume 6), and the LSD-assisted therapy he engaged in the late 1960s with the therapist Jim Hayes (an experience influencing the story "The Beholders" in Volume 12), Sturgeon was an "auditor" during the early period of Dianetics, went through an EST workshop in the early 1980s, and, with Jayne, explored Macro Philosophy and the tenets of the American Holistic church. Despite these experiences with different philosophies, religions, and therapies, he remained most attached to the themes expressed in his own writing. On a side note, the dish the main character cooks in this story is a classic Sturgeon culinary creation; worth trying, at least once, if just for the visual presentation, which is entirely science-fictional.

"Not an Affair" *Fantasy and Science Fiction*, October 1983. Written in 1981, and originally submitted to Playboy, but removed by Sturgeon from consideration when, according to him: "... the Playboy editors scrawled and scratched ('Eliminate the first six pages. Make the reporter a (militant) woman.')." F&SF editor's teaser: "Here is a rare short story from Ted Sturgeon, whose last appearance here was in the 25th anniversary issue (October 1974). Like many Sturgeon stories, it concerns an aspect of love, but it begins with an epidemic...."

"Black Moccasins," 1983. Previously unpublished. In a letter written to Kirby McCauley, Sturgeon says: "*Herewith short story, mainstream, prob. women's market, Black Moccasins.*" The letter is headed: "*Lawrence, Kansas: On the road. July 30, 1983.*" Sturgeon was in Kansas for the summer science-fiction writing course he taught for many years for the Intensive English Institute on the Teaching of Science Fiction founded by James Gunn. It is possible the story was written during the time he was teaching the class. This story's detailed description of ways to save money was typical of Sturgeon, and many of his letters recount such economies with excruciating good humor. For much of his life he was very poor, and yet he delighted in describing in detail how he managed to get by through methods such as gluing new soles

on his shoes, eating mayonnaise sandwiches, and heating soup in a can with a soldering iron. Years of poor nutrition and skipped doctor visits surely contributed to his early death (and eating soup heated with a soldering iron very likely didn't help).

“The Trick” (*Chic*, January 1984). Teaser: “They could talk about coffee; they could talk about the weather. They could talk about everything but the trick. To believe it—you had to see it.” It’s likely that this story was written earlier than its publication date of 1984, as it continues the adventures of the characters in “The Country of Afterward” (in this volume), though with a much slimmer plot. In a weird echo of the Kurt Vonnegut character, Kilgore Trout, (who was based on Sturgeon), a science-fiction writer who also wrote pornography, this foray into pornography by Sturgeon was not very successful either as story or as pornography, in my opinion. I like to think Vonnegut, who called Sturgeon “one of the best writers in America,” (see his foreword in Volume Seven), would have appreciated this irony.

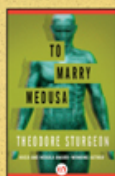
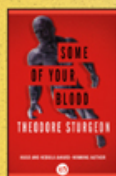
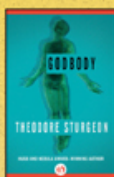
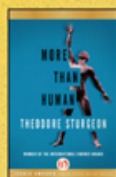
“Grizzly” 1983. *Not The Reader*, Summer. *Not the Reader* was a free city weekly published in San Diego, where Sturgeon lived off and on from 1976 to 1980. His experience as a patient with diffuse interstitial pneumonitis clearly informs this piece. His condition was idiopathic; that is, the doctors were unable to determine the exact cause, usually exposure to asbestos. As a result he went through many tests. Sturgeon theorized that he had been possibly exposed from his years in the Merchant Marine (whose ships’ interiors were lined with asbestos), or from living in so many basement apartments, but his preferred culprit was his favorite Zippo butane lighter, which pulled the lighter-fluid fumes down and through a tiny asbestos filter into the pipe, and thus the lungs. (Jayne Williams, personal communication). “Grizzly” is the last story Sturgeon wrote.

ABOUT THEODORE STURGEON

Theodore Sturgeon was born on February 26, 1918 and died in Eugene, Oregon, on May 8, 1985. A resident of New York City, Woodstock, New York, Los Angeles, and Springfield, Oregon, he was the author of more than thirty novels and short story collections. He won the International Fantasy Award for his novel *More Than Human*; the Hugo Award and Nebula Award for his short story *Slow Sculpture*; the Outstanding Achievement Award from the International Society of Science Fiction, Horror and Fantasy for the *Star Trek* screenplay, "Amok Time"; and the Gaylactica/Spectrum Award for his ground-breaking story about homosexuality, "The World Well Lost." For the influence on comic books of his short story *It*, he won the Inkpot Award. His idea of "bleshing" (the interaction of different individuals in a gestalt, from *More Than Human*) was influential for performers from The Grateful Dead to the Blue Man Group. He was known for the creation of Sturgeon's Law (Every genre, without exception, is 90% crap) and the credo: "Ask the next question." For his lifetime of work, he was awarded a World Fantasy Achievement Award, and was inducted into the Science Fiction Hall of Fame in 2000.

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